

COVID SECOND WAVE MISPLACED BLAME ON MUTANTS

JOURNALISM WITH A HUMAN TOUCH

| www.theweek.in

| [f TheWeekMag](#)

| [TheWeekLive](#)

| ₹60

**JAGAN'S SISTER & THE
BATTLE FOR TELANGANA**

**TWO STATES
QUARREL OVER
HANUMAN'S BIRTHPLACE**

**KABIR BEDI ON HIS
EXTRAORDINARY LIFE**

MAY 9, 2021

THE WEEK



CONFUSED ON KABUL

As US pulls out,
India softens to Taliban.
Are we too late?

PLUS

**MOHAMMED
UMER DAUDZAI,**
AFGHANISTAN'S SPECIAL
ENVOY TO PAKISTAN

**Taliban has reached out
to India 24 times**

A fighter of a breakaway faction of
the Taliban stands guard in a mountain
area in Herat province

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

**BECAUSE
YOU NEED TO
PROTECT
YOURSELF
FROM THE
AFTER-
EFFECTS OF
COVID.**

Visit Apollo ReCOVer Clinics today.

Exclusive Clinics
for post-covid care

To book an appointment call

1860 500 0202




Apollo
ReCOVer
— clinics —

Ask
Apollo™
your health online



Apollo
24|7

contents

FOR THE WEEK MAY 3 - MAY 9

45

**COVID-19**

THE WEEK decodes the mutations and variants of the fast-evolving Covid-19 virus

58

**RELIGION**

Claims that Hanuman was born in Tirupati cause a stir in Karnataka, which has for years held that he was born near Hampi

65

**@LEISURE**

In his new memoir, Kabir Bedi reveals how his successes and setbacks remade him as a person

28 COVER STORY

BACK ON TRACK
Taliban fighters in Nerkh, Wardak province, Afghanistan

COMFORT ZONE CRUMBLD

US President Joe Biden's decision to pull all US troops out of Afghanistan by September 11 has come as a major strategic and diplomatic nightmare for India. India will now have to consider the once unthinkable policy of directly engaging with the Taliban in order to protect its own interests in the region.

PLUS

- Taliban has reached out to India 24 times: Mohammed Umer Daudzai, Afghanistan's special envoy to Pakistan

18 PHOTO-FEATURE

Capturing the colours and clamour of the assembly elections in West Bengal

14 POLITICS

The Congress stands to lose with Y.S. Sharmila's foray into Telangana politics

62 DRIVE TO LIVE

The UP government wants the Bundelkhand expressway to be the country's safest highway

COLUMNS

- 10 POWER POINT**
Sachidananda Murthy
- 44 BITTER CHOCOLATE**
Swara Bhasker
- 74 MANI-FESTO**
Mani Shankar Aiyar

COVER DESIGN
BINESH SREEDHARAN
COVER PHOTO
EMANUELE SATOLLI

Printed at Malayala Manorama Press, Kottayam, Print House India Pvt Ltd, Mumbai, M P Printers, Noida, and Rajhans Enterprises, Bengaluru, and published from Manorama Buildings, Panampilly Nagar, Kochi-682 036, by **Jacob Mathew**, on behalf of the Malayala Manorama Company Private Ltd., Kottayam-686 001. Editor **Philip Mathew**
• Focus/Infocues features are paid marketing/PR initiatives



No more violations

We are sitting atop a volcano ('India on guard', April 25). The situation is really alarming. There is desperation and despondency everywhere.

While experts say that multiple factors powered the second wave in India, elections and the slackening of public vigil during functions have definitely contributed to the malaise. While it is convenient to blame political parties and leaders, the rest of society cannot absolve itself. The media and the general public turned a blind eye to the flagrant violation of safety norms.

All is not lost even now. We must exercise our collective will to observe stringent rules and guidelines, in letter and spirit. We must not only set an example to others but also intervene proactively when there are violations.

Rajan Philips,
On email.

A multitudes of countries and crores of people have already suffered due to the deadly virus, reported to have

originated in China. But it is disheartening to know that neither the United Nations nor the World Health Organization have

taken any action against China.

V.G. Pushkin,
Thiruvananthapuram.

Vaccination will help in reducing the severity of the disease, thereby reducing hospitalisation and the death rate. The local authorities must focus on micro-containment zones, and strict action should be taken for any neglect.

K.V. Vaidyanathan,
On email.

The fundamental principle of public health is to save human lives, and we need to work together regardless of our political leanings and socio-economic status. It is only then that life will return to normalcy in the country.

S.R. Gadicherla,
Bengaluru.

Show no mercy

K.V. Madhusudhanan, founder DIG of CoBRA, said that insurgents have the liberty to butcher soldiers in large numbers but to single out a Maoist from other civilians is a thankless exercise for which organisations like CoBRA have to answer and account for later ('Fighting our people', April 25).

Surely, on certain issues we have to change our ways like the US did while it crushed Osama bin Laden. Nobody questioned its action for a fair trial.

Sanath Kumar T.S.,
On email.

The article by Madhusudhanan was timely and highlights glaring loopholes in the deployment of the security personnel by spreading them thinly to cover large areas, thereby making it easy for the Maoists to attack them.

The time has come for the Union government to take drastic steps to liberate the strongholds of the Maoists. A warning should be given to insurgents, failing which they should be captured using force.

K.V. Chandrasekharan,
On email.

Lost respect

In the interview with S.N. Shrivastava, the police commissioner of Delhi, Namrata Biji Ahuja seems to have let him off the hook ('Due procedure followed in case against activists' April 25).

If due procedure was followed in the arrest of activists, then how is that practically every case

HOW TO REACH US

SUBSCRIPTIONS/CUSTOMER CARE

For all subscription related inquiries please write, email or fax to Senior Manager, Circulation, Manorama Buildings, PB No. 4278, Panampilly Nagar, Kochi - 682036, Kerala.
Email: subscribe@theweek.in
Toll free no.: 1800 1035187
Cochin: 0484-4447507
For advertising: +91 98953 95907
Email: magazineads@mm.co.in

CIRCULATION

Bengaluru: 080-22247735/22247736
Bhopal: 0755-2988036
Chandigarh: 0172-2724699
Chennai: 044-66918530/31
Coimbatore: 0422-2241911/2245470
Delhi: 011-23739740

Hyderabad:

040-23314168/23324692
Kolkata: 033-24198233
Kottayam: 0481-2563646
Lucknow: 0522-2341576
Mumbai: 022-24901331, 39495969
Patna: 0612-2233809
Jaipur: 0141-2368360/4005808
Thiruvananthapuram: 0471-2328198

BUREAU

Bengaluru: 080-22667345, 22867050
Kolkata: 033-24556995, 24198344, ext.216
Chennai: 044-66918500
Delhi: 011-23354920
Hyderabad: 040-23314168, 23324692
Mumbai: 022-22074604, 22004358
Bhopal: 0755-2431001
Lucknow: 0522-2701125

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

Manorama Buildings, PB. No. 26, Kottayam 686001, Kerala, India.
Tel: 0481-2563646
REGIONAL CO-ORDINATING OFFICE
Tej Building, 1st Floor, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi 110 002.
Tel: 011-23354920, 23354921, 23359541, 23355801, 23356537
Fax: 43541354

EDITORIAL

Manorama Buildings, PB. No. 4278, Panampilly Nagar, Kochi 682036, Kerala, India.
✉ editor@theweek.in
🌐 <http://www.theweek.in>
☎ +91 484-4447888
✉ +91 484-2315745

lodged by the police is being questioned by courts.

Shrivastava does not tell us why a single hate-monger has not been hauled up in the manner that activists have been. The fact is Delhi Police has lost the respect of citizens.

Sudhakar Nair,
On email.

Awe-inspiring story

The story on the NGO, Muskaan, was awe-inspiring; the strength that Pramod Bhasin and his wife Mridul are showing is admirable ('A poignant smile', April 25).

What makes Durva's story so different is the initiative taken by her family. The Bhasins did not mourn the death of their daughter for long. Instead, they channelised their emotions into something that could change society.

Dimple Rajpal,
On email.

Need more research

Albert Einstein's brain reportedly weighed only 1.23kg, less than the average adult brain which weighs about 1.4kg ('Soundbite', April 18). However, the density of neurons was greater. Einstein's parietal lobes—which are implicated in mathematical, visual, and spatial cognition—were 15 per cent wider than normal parietal lobes.

As we are already aware of the empirical significance of our brain size in our becoming humans, our further enquiries must look at the factors

responsible for our higher intelligence.

Pankaj Kumar
Chatterjee,
On email.

Good job

Your cover story on the India Against Corruption movement deserves full-some praise ('A spring to remember', April 18). From the catchy and suitable title to the main article and interviews, Soni Mishra has covered every aspect.

It also shows how time and again the gullible *janata* of our country gets tricked as some selfish political party hijacks a well-meaning *andolan*.

Meera Ugra,
Bengaluru.

The IAC movement was successful in many ways and has achieved in bringing the political establishment to agree to many of their demands. After reading the interviews in the cover story, it is quite evident that Arvind Kejriwal is a street-smart politician.

Rajanish Sasidharan,
On email.

Drive carefully

The measures initiated by the Union ministry of road transport and highways are commendable ('Safe journey', March 28). It will go a long way in curtailing accidents on highways.

The front seat co-passenger should keep an eye on the driver and see to it that he is not dozing off.

Amar L. Naik,
On email.

Editor
Chief Associate Editor & Director
Editor-in-Charge
Senior News Editor
News Editor
Deputy News Editors
Resident Editor, Delhi
Senior Coordinating Editor, Delhi
Chief of Bureau, Mumbai
Deputy Chief of Bureau, Delhi
Chief Subeditors
Senior Subeditors
Subeditors

SENIOR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENTS
Delhi: Rekha Dixit, Mandira Nayyar,
Namrata Biji Ahuja, Soni Mishra,
K. Sunil Thomas
Srinagar: Tariq Ahmad Bhat
Lucknow: Puja Awasthi
Kolkata: Rabi Banerjee

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENTS
Delhi: Pratul Sharma, Pradip R. Sagar
Bengaluru: Prathima Nandakumar
Thiruvananthapuram: Cithara Paul
Mumbai: Nachiket Kelkar
Chennai: Lakshmi Subramanian
Bhopal: Sravani Sarkar
Ahmedabad: Nandini Gunavantani Oza
PRINCIPAL CORRESPONDENTS

Photo Editor: Sanjoy Ghosh
Deputy Photo Editors
Bhanu Prakash Chandra, Salil Bera
Chief Photographers
Delhi: Arvind Jain, Sanjay Ahlawat
Mumbai: Arun Suhas Mansabdar
Photographer
Delhi: Aayush Goei
Chief Picture Coordinator
Bimal Nath C.
Research: Jomy M. Joseph
Photo Archivist: Deepak Joy T.

Philip Mathew
Riyad Mathew
V.S. Jayachandran
Stanley Thomas
Lukose Mathew
Matthew T. George, Maijo Abraham,
Ajish P. Joy
K.S. Sachidananda Murthy
R. Prasanna
Dnyanesh V. Jathar
Neeru Bhatia
Susamma Kurian, Navin J. Antony
Anirudha Karindalam,
Anirudh Madhavan
Diya Mathew, Karthik Ravindranath,
Reuben Joe Joseph, Nirmal Jovial

Hyderabad: Rahul Devulapalli
Kochi: Anjuly Mathai

SENIOR CORRESPONDENTS
Bengaluru: Mini P. Thomas,
Abhinav Singh
Delhi: Sneha Bhura
Mumbai: Pooja Birala Jaiswal

CHIEF REPORTER
UAE: Raju Mathew, Dubai

Art Editor: Jayakrishnan M.T.
Assistant Art Editor: Binesh Sreedharan
Senior Infographic Designer: Sreemankandan S.
Illustrator: B. Bhaskaran
Layout Artist: B. Manojkumar
Designers: Deni Lal, Job P.K.
Graphic Designer: Syam Krishnan
Artists: Rajesh A.S., Sumesh C.N.,
Sujesh K., Ajeesh Kumar M., Jaiaraj T.G.
Senior Researcher: Rani G.S.

THEWEEK.IN

Deputy New Media Coordinator
Senior Subeditors
Subeditors
Senior Researcher
Multimedia

Executive Director
Vice President, Marketing, Advertising Sales
Vice President, Circulation
Senior General Manager, Sales
MUMBAI
Resident Chief General Manager
CHENNAI
Regional Chief General Manager
BENGALURU
Regional Chief General Manager
NEW DELHI
Chief Marketing Officer (North) & Head, Special Projects

Sarath Ramesh Kunil
Hazeeda Vijayakumar, Sumitra Nair,
Vaishak E. Hari, Anicy K. Sunny,
Jose K. George, Justin Paul George
Vinoth V.K., Anita Babu,
Varun Ramesh Bala,
Oshin Grace Daniell
Saju C. Daniel
Rahul J. Mohan, Vipin Das P.
George Jacob
Varghese Chandu
M. Rajagopalan Nair
Hari M. Varrier
Shree Kumar Menon
K.C. Suresh
Ranjit Kurien
R. Rajmohan

POINT BLANK



All these [BJP] guys are dynasts. Piyush Goyal is not a dynast? Anurag Thakur is not a dynast? I have made a list of 37, they are all dynasts. What is [Amit Shah's son] Jay Shah's contribution to cricket? Nobody talks about it.

Derek O'Brien,
Trinamool Congress leader

The pandemic may indeed be the gravest crisis the nation has faced since Partition. More than ever before, we need a government that learns to listen, that listens to learn....

Ramachandra Guha,
historian

The quality of governance has sunk to an abysmal low. The result is what we see around us—deprivation, debt, disease and death. Did the people who voted the government to power in 2019 deserve this? I would say no.

P. Chidambaram,
Congress leader

I can only imagine that while you are having these IPL games, outside the stadium you have ambulances going to hospitals. I don't know how the coverage on TV is, but I would really appreciate if it is a little bit muted in nature.

Abhinav Bindra,
Olympic gold medalist



I went through body-shaming right from the time I was 12.... People are passing comments about your body and saying, "Oh my God, why is your butt so big?" And I am like, "What do you mean?" It takes a lot of inner strength to tell yourself that what they are saying doesn't matter.

Ileana D'Cruz,
actor

WORD PLAY

The second Covid-19 wave has triggered a **panpanic** in the country, and it seems like it is not going to end anytime soon. Panpanic refers to a strong feeling of fear caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to a lack of reasonable thought and action. As India is witnessing mass cremations and a deluge of Covid deaths, it won't be an exaggeration to say that it is not just the people, but the whole "system" that is in panpanic.

MILESTONES

LIVING LEGEND

Anthony Hopkins, 83, became the oldest actor ever to win Best Actor at the Oscars, clinching the award for his performance in the film *The Father*. This is his second Best Actor Oscar.



IN ELITE CLUB

The Defence Research and Development Organisation has successfully developed single crystal blades—made of nickel-based superalloys capable of withstanding high temperatures—for aero engines. Only countries such as the US, the UK, France and Russia have this capability.



SHARPSHOOTER

Stephen Curry broke the NBA record for the most three-pointers made in a month as his team, Golden State Warriors, beat Sacramento Kings 117-113 on April 25. Curry shot seven three-pointers in the game to take his April tally to 85. The previous record was held by James Harden (82).





m4marry.com

Where *families* find each other

**BECAUSE, WHEN
TWO PEOPLE WED
EACH OTHER, TWO
FAMILIES MARRY
INTO EACH OTHER.**

That's why you need
m4marry.com
the perfect matrimonial site

www.m4marry.com | Register for free

Accessible
across devices



CALL : TN - 7356750505 • Karnataka - 7594040110
• AP/Telangana - 7356426111 • Kerala - 78598 74999





— APERITIF —

THE BIG PICTURE

RHYTHM, REDISCOVERED

Musicians and singers in concert mark the reopening of Teatro La Fenice, an opera house in Venice, on April 26. After months of stop-start restrictions to manage its second and third Covid-19 waves, Italy has allowed a partial reopening of concert halls, theatres, bars and restaurants in the country.

PHOTO BY AFP



Vanity or necessity?

The first wave of Covid-19 mainly hit cities. The second wave, described by the prime minister as a storm, has reached even tier-four towns and hundreds of villages across the country. But urban areas are bearing the brunt as both government and private hospitals, and even general medical practitioners, are mainly located in cities and towns. The Union government is directly administering Chandigarh and major parts of Delhi through three agencies—the Delhi Development Authority, the New Delhi Municipal Committee and the Delhi Cantonment Board, administered by the urban development, home and defence ministries, respectively.

The urban development ministry has launched huge programmers under both the UPA (Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission) and the NDA (smart cities) over the last two decades. But the pandemic has exposed the inadequacy of health infrastructure. Yet, the biggest noise from the urban development ministry is not about new hospitals, but for the ambitious ₹20,000 crore Central Vista project, which was conceptualised well before the Covid-19 crisis. Critics of the project, which will demolish a dozen well-known “Bhavans” of the government—Krishi, Rail, Udyog, Nirman, Sena, Vayu—that house key ministries, are demanding that it should be stopped and the money diverted for hospitals and health care.

In Mumbai, there are demands that the ambitious Shivaji-statue-in-the-Arabian-Sea project, costing ₹3,500 crore, should be halted and the money used for the health sector. The Uttar Pradesh government is also pouring funds into the new Ayodhya city and a giant Lakshman statue in Lucknow. Earlier, the Gujarat government’s Statue of Unity project, too, had its share of critics.

But, the Central Vista project—which includes sprawling official residences for the vice president and the prime minister, and a new parliament house and convention centre—is urgently needed for the 21st century governance of India, where the government has grown to 51 ministries and the number of MPs will go up. Urban development minister Hardeep Singh Puri, who is piloting the project, which is the central public work department’s biggest ever, has harshly criticised the existing Bhavans of the Nehru and Indira eras as “ugly and unfit for a modern nation”.

Those in favour of the project do not agree that the money-guzzler is a vanity project and point

out how it would repay the investment through energy savings and improved efficiency. There is also the argument that mega construction activity helps the wheels of the economy turn faster, generating jobs and profits for businesses, big and small.

Despite the Covid situation, Puri’s ministry has refused to pause the project

as it has a tight deadline to get the new parliament house functional (2022). Moreover, all Union ministries have to move into new buildings a year later. Reportedly, on April 16, the Central Public Works Department designated the project an essential service and informed the Delhi Police that work will continue “during all three shifts”.

When the prime minister and his team face the 2024 elections, they would have the satisfaction of having remoulded much of the controversial Lutyens Delhi (which was completed in 1927 during the British rule). For the next three years, central Delhi will reverberate with the noise of construction, drowning out the noise of the project’s opponents.



THE WEEK SUPER READER OFFER

**SUBSCRIBE TO THE WEEK.
SAVE UP TO 65% AND GET FABULOUS ASSURED PRIZES.**

Amazon.in Email Gift Card



Sheaffer Pen & Wallet



Wildcraft Backpack



UCB Leather Wallet & Card Holder



US Polo Wheeler Bag



THE WEEK Travel Bag



Tell Me Why Magazine for Children

Yes! I would like to subscribe to THE WEEK.

Term	No of issues	News-stand Price	You Pay Only*	Mega Savings	Your Free Prize
☒ 5 years	260	₹ 15,600/-	₹ 5,500/-	₹ 10,100/-	☒ Rs 1500 Amazon.in Email Gift Card OR ☒ US Polo Wheeler Bag OR ☒ Sheaffer Pen & Wallet Best Offer
☐ 3 years	156	₹ 9,360/-	₹ 4,000/-	₹ 5,360/-	☐ Rs 1000 Amazon.in Email Gift Card OR ☐ 3 year subscription of Tell Me Why OR ☐ Wildcraft Backpack
☐ 1 year	52	₹ 3,120/-	₹ 1,400/-	₹ 1,720/-	☐ United Colors of Benetton Leather Wallet & Card Holder OR ☐ Rs 500 Amazon.in Email Gift Card OR ☐ THE WEEK Travel Bag OR ☐ 1 year subscription of Tell Me Why

Name: Mr./Ms. _____ Date of Birth: _____ Current Subscription Number (If renewing): _____

Address: _____

Post Office _____ City/District: _____ State: _____ PIN (essential): _____

Phone: (Mobile) _____ (Res) _____ Email: _____

To receive Amazon.in email gift card, email id & mobile number are mandatory.

If email ID, mobile number & prize are not mentioned for 5, 3 and 1 year subscriptions, US Polo Wheeler Bag, Wildcraft Backpack and THE WEEK Travel Bag will be sent respectively.

Cheque/DD No.: _____ dated: _____ for [] ₹ 5500 [] ₹ 4000 [] ₹ 1400 **favouring THE WEEK**

Bank Name: _____

I agree to inform any changes in the postal address/contact numbers to which the publication is sent, as and when any such changes happen, and also to receive any details regarding the subscription. THE WEEK magazine/Malayala Manorama group of publications may also contact the email-id/contact numbers given by you for information/upgrade of THE WEEK magazine/Malayala Manorama group of publications and offer promotions. In case you are not interested to receive any such information please tick the box ☐

For terms and conditions please refer www.theweek.in *On a cover price of ₹ 60/- website: theweek.in facebook.com/theweekmag google.com/+TheWeekMag @theweeklive

Fill in, enclose your payment and send to THE WEEK, Manorama Buildings, P.O.Box No.4278, Panampilly Nagar, Kochi - 682036, Kerala, India.

TW/1021890/10-05-2021

To subscribe, visit manoramaonline.com/subscribe or call 18001035981 (Toll free)



FACE VALUE

Trinamool Congress stalwart Subrata Mukherjee was, as expected, at the heart of the election campaign in his constituency—Ballygunge in Kolkata. But he was mostly not wearing a mask. When asked about his 'unmasked' state, Mukherjee quipped: "If I cover my face, how will the media get to see my face?" That seems to be the thumb rule of every rally: publicity first, safety next.

ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

ROUND 1 TO THE BJP

Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa recently asked people to get themselves vaccinated, even as the state government imposed a partial lockdown. On Twitter, the Congress asked: "How will people come for vaccination as the lockdown has stopped public transport and prohibited the movement of private vehicles?" The BJP hit back with: "This is not a Congress election rally to ferry hundreds of people in a bus. It is a vaccination drive."

ROGUE LIEUTENANT?

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palanisami is a worried man. He recently underwent a hernia surgery and while many politicians, including perceived intraparty rivals, inquired about his health, his trusted lieutenant, cabinet minister S.P. Velumani, did not do so. Instead, Velumani went on vacation to Goa. Sources are learnt to have informed the chief minister that Velumani was in Goa for "closed-door meetings".

DETAILS OF THE 'CASE'

When Justice S.A. Bobde, who recently retired as chief justice of India, suffered a fracture in a 2019 while riding a Harley-Davidson, the incident received wide media coverage. It has now come out that Bobde wished to buy the motorcycle, which belonged to senior advocate Vikas Singh. The accident happened during a trial run, which Bobde had gone on despite Singh warning him that the bike was too heavy for him.

'GROUNDED' LEADER

Some people's representatives in Madhya Pradesh have been missing in action amid the pandemic. Others have been everywhere, even providing hearses or wood for funerals. As the oxygen crisis loomed, Energy Minister Pradhuman Singh Tomar and Gwalior MLA Praveen Pathak (of the Congress) both went all out to arrange oxygen. The BJP minister went a step further by prostrating before the management of a company which helped; he also retweeted a video of the "expression of gratitude".



SURPRISE TEST

During the campaign for the recent bypoll in Maharashtra's Pandharpur, Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar wanted to ensure that workers of all three parties of the ruling Maha Vikas Aghadi were wholeheartedly involved. Ahead of a rally, he noticed that Shiv Sena workers were sparse and went straight to a nearby *shakha*. He sat there for half an hour, forcing the party workers to turn up. He then held an impromptu meeting to find out which of them were active in the campaign.

IN JANUARY, THE TELANGANA

Jana Samithi (TJS) approached the police for permission to hold a protest at Dharna Chowk, one of the oldest venues for public agitations in Hyderabad. But the three-year-old party's request was rejected. Until recently, TJS was the youngest political outfit in Telangana, launched with popular faces and some hype.

"We wanted to hold a two-day protest at Dharna Chowk," said M. Kodandaram. "When permission was denied, we requested the police to let us to protest for a day. That, too, was rejected." The TJS had planned a protest on five issues, including the urgent need to provide jobs to the youth. A former Osmania University professor, Kodandaram had led the Telangana Joint Action Committee which fought for the formation of the new state; he later declared war on the Telangana Rashtra Samithi and co-founded TJS.

Where the TJS failed, Y.S. Sharmila—daughter of Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, former chief minister of united Andhra Pradesh; sister of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy—succeeded and how. In April, she and her supporters held a one-day protest at Dharna Chowk and raised the same issue that the TJS was raising—youth employment. A few days before that, she had held a huge public meeting in Khammam, south Telangana. She flayed the K. Chandrashekar Rao government on a variety of issues ranging from education and health care to agriculture and housing. At Khammam, she dropped a bombshell: "We are going to start a party. It will bring back the YSR era."

The new party will be launched on July 8—Reddy's birth anniversary. This will be the second party from the house of YSR; the first being the YSR Congress Party founded by Jagan. Sharmila is clear that her party will take on the TRS. The TRS, however, is maintaining a stoic silence;



Daughter's in, Hand's down

The Congress stands to lose with Y.S. Sharmila's foray into Telangana politics

BY RAHUL DEVULAPALLI

state units of the Congress and the BJP, too, are watching warily. But what was more surprising was the positive coverage she received from a section of the media, known to be soft towards the Telugu Desam Party and its supremo N. Chandrababu Naidu.

The sequence of events, which has been unfolding since the beginning of the year, has raised speculations over the probable forces behind Sharmila. Pitta Ramreddy, a close associate of Sharmila, said they did not have the support of any political party. "The TRS government was compelled to give us permission since they were also holding public meetings for by-elections," he said. "We have not sought help from anyone and we do not have to."

Ramreddy is confident that many leaders from other parties will soon join them. "We have got calls from senior leaders, including MLAs, pledging support," he said. "They are from almost all major parties including the TRS, Congress and others. All of them see a strong and credible leader in Sharmila garu, who carries YSR's charisma. The response has been overwhelming and we are confident we will make a huge difference in state politics in the coming days."

Sharmila's next move will most likely be the tried and tested gambit of the YSR family—padayatra. Her father walked for three months in 2003, covering more than 1,500km, which catapulted him to power in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh. In 2017, Jagan's 3,600km-long padayatra, which stretched to over one and a half years, won him a landslide victory and the chief ministership. Now, keeping the 2023 assembly elections in mind, Sharmila is gearing up for a similar padayatra in Telangana, which may extend to more than two years.

However, Sharmila is not new to padayatras. In 2012, when Jagan was jailed in a disproportionate assets case, Sharmila went on a 3,000km padayatra to strengthen the newly-formed YSR Congress Party. Post that, she has only emerged from the shadows to support her brother during election campaigns. Though she has never contested an election nor held any crucial party posts, Sharmila is a confident speaker who connects well with the masses. A few slogans against Naidu and his son, popularised by her in the 2019 elections, clicked well with voters.

But Jagan has distanced himself from his sister's decision to enter Telangana politics. He had taken a stand to steer clear of any political

Sharmila is clear that her party will take on the TRS. The TRS, however, is maintaining a stoic silence; state units of the Congress and the BJP, too, are watching warily.

activity in Telangana as it would be detrimental to the interests of Andhra Pradesh; the two bifurcated states still have to sort out several issues. Sharmila, on the contrary, felt the need to further the goodwill her father garnered in Telangana and to revive the YSR family vote bank. While the family claims that there is no personal animosity between the siblings, the political rift is evident.

The big question though is which party stands to lose the most with Sharmila's entry. If the powerful Reddy vote bank transfers its backing from the Congress to Sharmila, then the national party will be hit badly. A good number of voters had stayed with the Congress because of their loyalty to the late YSR. Sharmila's biggest disadvantage is that she hails from Andhra's Rayalaseema region; she is seen as someone who opposed statehood for Telangana.

"It is too early to talk about her," said Congress spokesperson Sravan Dasoju. "Telangana has a special character and history and it is unlike any other state. The state was formed due to sacrifices made against the hegemony of Andhra leadership. In the long term, people will certainly question her and she will have to prove her commitment to Telangana. There will also come a time when she will have to fight her own brother on water issues between the two states. So, we will have to see how she deals with that."

Political analyst Telakapalli Ravi agreed that only the Congress stands to lose with Sharmila's political foray, but added that legacy alone will not help her. "There are major political parties like the Congress and the BJP. She has to overcome a lot of difficulties to get ahead of them," he said. "Her scope is limited for now and she can be a minor player in the state. It looks like the TRS wants to create space for her and the BJP also wants her here." ●

Catch the Rain Drops to Water Abundance

India may be heading for one of the world's worst national water crises where according to findings of some studies more than 50% of the population has no access to safe drinking water and every year about 200,000 people perish as they have no access to potable water. India is said to have just 4% of the world's fresh water, but is home to 18% of the global population. Along with its growing population and highly disproportionate and inefficient use of water in agriculture, the overall water availability is running dry. Water scarcity in India is expected to worsen as the overall population is expected to touch 1.6 billion by year 2050.

Catch the Rain: Where it falls, When it Falls

World Water Day celebrated on 22nd March, 2021, was a significant day for India when Hon'ble Prime Minister **Shri Narendra Modi** launched the "**Jal Shakti Abhiyan: Catch the rain**" campaign with the theme "Catch the rain, where it falls, when it falls" to address the challenges of growing water crisis, which is increasing with the increasing pace of development in the country. Mr Modi said, "Water security and water management is crucial for the future of coming generations." The campaign is driven by the National Water Mission, Ministry of Jal Shakti to activate the states and all stakeholders to create appropriate Rain Water Harvesting Structures (RWHS) and other water storage devices in accordance to the climatic conditions and sub-soil strata of the region, with active participation of people at the grassroots. The campaign aims at preparedness before the onset of monsoon to maximise the Catch of the rain drops!

In India, the dance of peacock, the national bird of India, with its iridescent plumage in full expanse is seen as a harbinger of rain quenching the parched earth after a prolonged spell of harsh summer. "**Piku**" the Peacock, is appropriately the mascot of this "Catch the Rain" campaign.

Strategies to Catch The Rain

Under this campaign, engaging people at the grassroots for successful implementation of the drive is a significant part of the strategic interventions. Construction of check dams, water harvesting pits, rooftop RWHS, desilting of tanks to increase storage capacity, removal of obstructions in the channel feeding water into them from the catchment areas, repairs to step-wells and using defunct bore-wells and unused wells to replenish aquifers and removal of encroachments etc., for trapping rainwater to increase water catchment and storage, restoration of wetlands, rejuvenation of rivulets and rivers etc are among the many endeavours of the campaign along with awareness drives.

It was for the first time that a concerted national campaign was launched with collective participation of all stakeholders to reverse the peril of water scarcity. PM Modi observed that India's development and self-reliance is dependent on water security and water availability, and emphasis has been made in making water governance a priority in its policies and decisions of the government for fulfilling the responsibility of the present generation towards the future generations.

At the launch, he drew the attention to several measures taken in the last 6 years to augment

Catch The Rain



water reserve through national programmes such as Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojna, water to every farm - Har Khet ko Paani, 'Per Drop More Crop' campaign and Namami-Gange Mission, Har Ghar Pani-Jal Jeevan Mission, Atal Bhujal Yojana and formation of a Ministry of Jal Shakti to co-ordinate all activities related to water. Satisfied that the awareness about Jal Shakti Mission is increasing, he expressed happiness that villagers are trying to save rainwater and educating others to promote efficient use of water.

Emphasising that water is more precious than money, PM Modi called for better management of rainwater that would help to replenish the depleted ground-water, significantly reduce the impact of losses during rainy seasons and increase the availability of water during summer, by saving more and more water when it rains. Therefore, it is imperative for campaigns





like 'Catch the Rain' to be successful. PM Modi said that Aadiwasi people have always put their faith in water and treated it as an important part of their life, adding that if country learns this faith from our Aadiwas, water problems in the country will be solved to a large extent.

Water Woes

At 130 crores people, India is the second largest population in the world after China. Every summer the serpentine queues of people - young, old and even children - awaiting their turn to fill their water pots is a common sight and is alarming too. In rural and remote areas, particularly, in regions with a swathe of parched lands, women and children are seen trudging miles each day to water bodies like streams and ponds to get water that barely suffices their daily need. The situation has impacted their health, affecting children's education and making the larger community's overall scenario very bleak.

Even though concerted efforts have been made in the past few decades in making drinking water available by the municipalities, the humongous population of the country has put immense stress on water resources where the rural areas find themselves side-lined. Added to it, the rapid urbanization stretching the available water resources is making the government grappling every summer to meet water need of the public. Findings suggest that over 21 % of India's diseases are water borne which is aggravated by poor access of the population to basic sanitation. With water being tapped to its last drop, their sources stand exposed to pollutants, more so if the monsoon is scanty.

India is blessed with abundant rains during the monsoon, but are we using this rain water to replenish water sources, which we rampantly extract for agriculture, drinking water and industrial purposes? A large quantity of this water is not saved and flows into the sea. Basically, an agrarian country depending very much on ground water

irrigation, replenishing of aquifers therefore is of utmost importance to raise the water table. Due to lack of a comprehensive water usage system plan, rural communities are compelled to tap groundwater by drilling more and more bore-wells, that too deeper and deeper. These menaces have now spread to urban areas as well.

Participation by Stakeholders

Under Catch the Rain initiative, District Collectors and Municipal Commissioners have been requested to open "Jal Shakti

Tribals revive Bio-ecosystem using traditional wisdom

Setting a fine example, the simple tribals, comprising mostly of bhils, in Jabhua belt of Madhya Pradesh, solved their longstanding water grievances by resorting to the wisdom of the Halna tradition prevalent in their culture. Within 8-10 years, by adopting traditional water harvesting and conservation methods, hundreds of villages were transformed into lush green regions. They reportedly made 90 ponds and innumerable other water sources, removed encroachment from catchment areas, installed protection device, desilted water bodies to increase capacity of water storage for rain water collection and preventing it from flowing away eroding top soil making it uncultivable.

Many such stories of successful local initiatives to Catch The Rain have been showcased in the National Water Mission's "Water Talks" held every third Fridays of a month virtually and can be seen at <http://nwm.gov.in/water-talk>.

Kendras" that will have a dedicated mobile phone number and manned by an engineer or a person well-trained in RWHS and water related issues. These Jal Shakti Kendras will act as knowledge/ technical guidance centres to all stakeholders on how to **Catch the rain, where it falls, when it falls**. Also, all water bodies in the districts shall be enumerated, (checked with revenue records) and encroachments to be removed. All Stakeholders having large tracts of land have been urged to take steps to "Catch the Rain".

Efforts are being made to make as many rooftop RWHS on buildings, to maximize collection of rainwater falling in the ground within the premises to remain there itself so that no or only negligible water spills out from there. This method of water collection will help in improving soil moisture and raising ground water table, besides reducing water inundation in urban areas. Urban-flooding is now frequent occurrences, causing damages and putting residents to severe inconveniences.

The National Water Mission (NWM), Ministry of Jal Shakti in collaboration with Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS), Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports had earlier started the 'Catch the Rain' Awareness Generation drive through various IEC activities, which will include conducting education and motivational programs, mass awareness drives like wall writing, rallies etc. The emphasis is to make the youth, the future of our country, aware about the precious water and the need to conserve it by taking a lead in revival of Baoli's, ponds, wells, rejuvenate water bodies, tree plantation, save nature and rely on traditional water saving methods through a comprehensive and integrated approach for water management. Over 2.04 crore people have so far taken part in this drive.

If the objective of the 'Catch The Rain' campaign is achieved, it will be great boost for the government's initiative to make Jal Andolan, a Jan Andolan.



POLL GALA

Capturing the colours and clamour of the
assembly elections in West Bengal

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY SALIL BERA



FEVER PITCH

A boy plays cricket in Kolkata in front of a Trinamool graffiti with "*khela hobe*" (game on) written on it

BACK-ING THE LEADER

A BJP supporter with the slogan "*Modi ke chai*" (We want Modi) painted on his back at Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rally in South 24 Parganas



Among the many festivals of West Bengal, the election season stands apart. This year, the campaigns were grander than usual. The state has never seen so many national leaders and political heavyweights whip up a storm like they did this time around. With movie stars in the fray—both as candidates and campaigners—multitudes gathered at the rallies, regardless of their political leanings.

From kites to sweets, saris to body art, masks to face paint, party symbols were everywhere. Another first was that over 700 companies of Central Reserve Police Force were deployed statewide to ensure smooth running of the polls. The echo of their heavy boots aroused as much fear in the hearts of the people as they instilled a sense of security in them.

THE WEEK captured the colours and textures of the spectacle that was the 2021 assembly elections in Bengal. Festoons, posters and hoardings fluttered across the state's skies in every party's colours, even as giant photographs of the leaders stared at citizens from their perches. The battle cries of "*asol poriborton* (real change)", in the words of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and "*khela hobe*" (game on), coming from the Trinamool Congress camp, rent the air as election fever ran high.

Come May 2, the results will finally reveal the fate of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in the toughest political contest of her five-decade-long career. ●



MASKED UP

An elderly person interacts with an official at a polling booth in West Midnapore

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

A rally in Kolkata jointly held by the CPI(M) and the Congress

SOUNDS OF A CAMPAIGN

A worker stacks loudspeakers for a public meeting at the Brigade Parade Ground in Kolkata



TAKING HIS SHOT
A CRPF jawan kicks a stray ball while patrolling on the outskirts of Kolkata



KEEPING THE FAITH
A BJP supporter at a rally in Kolkata



SAFETY FIRST
Workers sanitise the dias before Prime Minister Modi's meeting at Sahaganj in Dunlop

Ashok Lahiri,
BJP candidate from Balurghat and former chief
economic adviser to the Union government

Income generation and industrialisation are key for Bengal to survive

BY RABI BANERJEE

HAVING SERVED PRIME ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh as chief economic adviser, Ashok Lahiri has now taken the political plunge. A member of the 15th Finance Commission, Lahiri was originally supposed to contest from the Alipurduar seat in North Bengal. However, after opposition from local BJP leaders, the party's central leadership shifted Lahiri to Balurghat, the place his mother grew up in.

While the BJP has kept Bengal's guessing about its chief minister candidate, the state-level leadership has hinted that Lahiri could be their next finance minister. Excerpts from an interview:

You are an economist, policymaker and banker. But most people do not know that you are also a psephologist. What is your take on the Bengal elections?

People hardly know what goes on. I have some knowledge about the polls, but I never realised it is such a hard job. My candidature has made me understand this.

What do you mean?

In the past, policymakers like me used to blame politicians for not doing enough. That they did not fulfil promises. But they represent the electorate. Like [former US president] Barack Obama said, "You get the politicians you deserve." So, the politician cannot do something that his people will revolt against.

You said you have taken many things from Bengal and would now like to repay the state. What do you want to give back?

Bengal had occupied the prime position post-independence, but today that has eroded. There is a continuous decline in many parameters, for instance in terms of industrialisation and per capita income. In 1981, Bengal was eighth among the states in terms of per capita income. In 2011, it went down to the 18th position, and in 2018, 19th.

What about industrialisation?

Same story. If we take industry, not construction and electricity, but manufacturing, then Bengal's position has declined. Not all parameters have declined, but for me, per capita income and industrialisation of such a big state, with such a dense population, should have been the priority.

But land is an issue.

Yes, it is. But there are solutions. We must understand that having industries is not a choice, but a compulsion.

But the left government had tried to acquire land for industrialisation.

I appreciate that the leftists tried to industrialise Bengal. But their methods were wrong. There has to be a win-win situation for farmers.

The state government says that only barren land should be used for

industries.

If you believe that argument, then industries will come up only in the Thar Desert. Industries must come up in coastal areas. Our state government should have done land pooling long ago.

What do you propose?

Bengal is a coastal state without a modern, state-of-the-art port. We have a riverine port in Kolkata. But now the river is so silted that tankers cannot come. So, you need a deep sea port. The Centre's Sagarmala project has already proposed something on those lines. We need to take that up on a war footing.

So building better connectivity is important.

Yes. South and North Bengal need better connectivity. Just 570km between Kolkata and Siliguri takes about 14 hours by road. Mumbai to Ahmedabad, with the same distance, takes only 10 hours. Transporting goods has to be cheaper.

What do you think of the education system in the state?

It is pathetic. In education, Bengal was a pioneer. The first president (Rajendra Prasad) studied in my college (Presidency College in Kolkata). I do not understand why Bengal lost its great position.

Also, in terms of health, there is so much degradation. Bengalis go to



SALIL BERA

Bhubaneswar for treatment. I blame the law and order situation for this.

But the state government says that Bengal has the highest rate of economic growth in the country.

If it is so, then Bengal should have improved the economy of the state in a massive way, and per capita income and other parameters would have increased a lot. I do not say that I subscribe to all the arguments against Bengal, but questions have been raised about Bengal's growth story.

Lack of jobs is a crisis in many states, including Bengal.

Everyone wants government jobs because private jobs are not available. The Bengal government spends two-thirds of its budget on wages, salary, pensions and interests. So, [there] is no employment generation. We need to change this.

But the state government says it does not have enough money.

You should ask the state finance minister (Amit Mitra) this question. I do not have all the answers. But there are always ways. Bengal's GST (Goods and Services Tax) earnings are not bad. We have many options, particularly for the state and the local government. State excise is a possibility. Property tax and water charges are two areas. But I agree that they are not popular steps.

Have you spoken to your friend, Amit Mitra, after getting the ticket?
No, I have not spoken to Amit *da*.

What do you expect him to say?
Well, I do not know. He might be surprised that I joined politics.

Why?

He said that I had made him join politics, and I should follow the same path. I laughed at the idea [at the time]. Because I am a professional and I looked at it from that direction. Now, what would he tell me? ●

KINFRA OPENS UP NEW POSSIBILITIES COME ON, LET'S START AN ENTERPRISE IN KERALA

Kerala will soon acquire the status as the hub of advanced and futuristic industries. KINFRA has laid the groundwork for that

Kerala has a long history of producing many notable and new business models and companies. The first IT park in the country was established in Thiruvananthapuram. But Kerala lost its lustre as other states in India made rapid progress in industrial development. At one point, it was even dubbed as a "cemetery for businesses".

Today, however, Kerala is chasing the future prospects of industry. Kerala has stepped into many futuristic domains and have ambitious projects in petrochemical, defence, biotechnology, medical device manufacturing, light engineering and food processing sector. The Kerala government is preparing to make the state a 'emerging hub' for information-based and value-based industries. The government and the government agencies are working in tandem for the industrial development of the state. KINFRA (Kerala Industrial Infrastructure Development Corpora-

tion) is the driving force behind the activities to deal with the scarcity and high cost of industrial land. It is also keen to attract large-scale private investments to the state. In addition to providing the infrastructure to attract industries to the state, KINFRA is also making strides in attracting entrepreneurs to them.

KINFRA was formed to find a solution to the problem of land scarcity to start a business in Kerala. KINFRA, which has been instrumental in the industrial development of the state for 27 years, now provides services beyond the expectations of entrepreneurs in the changed times. For the fiscal year 2020-21, as of February 9, 261 units have been opened in KINFRA Parks. In the 2019-2020 financial year, 84 units were newly opened in KINFRA Parks. The number of units started in KINFRA Parks during the 2018-19 financial year was 78. This means more enterprises have become operational in KINFRA Parks than in previous years.

More industrial units equates to more investment and more jobs being created. KINFRA Parks has created 8,454 new jobs in the financial year 2020-21. This is also notable in a time of financial crisis and job losses due to Covid-19. In 2019-20 financial year, the number of jobs created stood at the count of 5,573. Similarly, investment in KINFRA Parks during the financial year 2019-20 was ₹398.81 crore. However, in 2020-21, the investment touched ₹1,187.21 crore—an all-time record.

Providing infrastructure for the industrial growth of the state and bringing massive private investment to Kerala, thereby creating the jobs that await, this is the established goal of KINFRA. KINFRA Managing Director Santosh Koshy Thomas says that over the past four years, and especially in the last two years, KINFRA has made remarkable achievements in all these areas.

KINFRA Industrial Park, Nellad



Welcoming mega projects

KINFRA has ensured that the state has infrastructure in place to welcome new possibilities and opportunities. A number of future-looking projects have been established so far. These include petrochemical park, spices park, defence park (Palakkad), mega food park (Palakkad), and development projects centered on Kannur International Airport. There are also plans to implement projects listed in the electronics manufacturing cluster project of the Central Ministry of Electronics and IT in Kakkad.

KINFRA is also responsible for the implementation of the Kochi-Bangalore Industrial Corridor project. The project aims to create a consortium of industrial enterprises by acquiring specific areas on both sides of the road. The opportunities that these parks provide for industrial ventures are numerous.

Petrochemical Park, Ambalamukal

When the foundation stone was laid for the KINFRA-led petrochemical park at the nearby Ambalamukal, it was envisioned as a novel business model, that would keep the refinery as a model company and create a number of ventures in the allied sector. When the park becomes operational within 30 months, Ambalamukal will become India's largest petrochemical hub.

Entrepreneurs can take advantage of the opening of the Propylene Derivatives Petrochemical Project at the BPCL Kochi Refinery through the KINFRA Petrochemical Park. The acrylates, acetic acid and oxal alcohols produced at the PDPP plant are the raw materials required for the manufacture of adhesives, coatings, solvents, plasticisers and water purification chemicals.

The acrylic acid unit with a capacity of 160 kg tonnes per annum is the first of its kind in India. The Oxo alcohol unit here is the only one of its kind in India. The process of allotting 100 acres of land to entrepreneurs is nearing completion.

Spices Park, Muttom

This park is intended to promote the spice industry. The foundation stone has been laid.



Santhosh Koshy Thomas
Managing Director, KINFRA

Investments in
KINFRA Parks
increased from
₹45.40 crore in
2016-2017 to
₹1,187.21 crore in
2020-2021; the total
investments in the
last five years is
₹1,911.61 crore.

Defence Park, Palakkad

This is the first defence park in the country. The park, which is being implemented under the Central Government's Modified Industrial Infrastructure Upgradation Scheme, covers an area of 60 acres. Of this, 47.50 acres will be given to companies. Defence manufacturing is one of the emerging industries in India. Recently, the Ministry of Defence banned the import of many weapons and equipment. In addition, foreign direct investment in certain sectors of defence manufacturing has been increased by up to 100 per cent. When such favourable factors exist, the Defence Park will surely contribute to the industrial growth of the state. The virtual business conclave, organized to showcase the investment potential of Defence Park to entrepreneurs, was attended by representatives from more than 200 defence equipment manufacturing companies. And, among them, more than 50 people have already expressed their interest.

Megafood Park, Palakkad

KINFRA Mega Food Park is located in Elappully and Pudukkad villages in Palakkad district. The project is being implemented as part of the Union Ministry of Food Processing's Mega Food Park. The mega park aims to bring together farmers and entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector to maximise the value added of agricultural products, increase farmers' incomes and create employment opportunities in rural areas. Within 15 days of the inauguration, the



KINFRA Food Processing Park, Ilamann



KINFRA Defence Park, Ottapalam



entire land in the mega park was sold. Construction of 30 units is progressing rapidly.

Industrial corridor

KINFRA is the nodal agency in Kerala for the Kochi-Bangalore Industrial Corridor. KINFRA will acquire 1,800 acres in Palakkad and 500 acres in Kochi. Ernakulam will be made a GIFT city (Global Industrial Financial and Trade City).

Kasargod-Mangalore Industrial Corridor is being prepared for acquisition of 5,000 acres of land. There will be the creation of a big land bank in Kannur as well.

Success achieved by realizing the possibilities

KINFRA is now actively reaching out to those who want to start a venture in Kerala. KINFRA provides everything that is needed in a timely manner.

"This is a reflection of the changing face of industrial Kerala. All possible due to the teamwork: The resolute approaches taken by the Hon'ble Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and the Hon'ble Industries Minister E.P. Jayarajan to improve the business-friendly environment in the State; Principal Secretary, Department of Industries, Dr. K. Elangovan's creative vision and leadership; and above all, the KINFRA team, which has worked tirelessly to create unparalleled achievements," explains Santosh Koshy Thomas. The strengthening of K-Swift, the provision of timely access to permits, including



KINFRA Hi-Tech Park, Kalamassery

for large scale industries, etc, have greatly contributed to the improvement of the business-friendly environment in Kerala, and it is a proud achievement that KINFRA has come a long way in making radical changes in its working style.

KINFRA is now at the forefront of providing the infrastructure required for the industrial growth of the State and encouraging the establishment of small, medium and large scale industries in Kerala. KINFRA has 32 industrial parks across the state. KINFRA Parks is a one-stop shop for entrepreneurs in every sense. Entrepreneurs will have the best infrastructure; permits are issued without delay, says Santosh Koshy Thomas.

KINFRA's transformation

Led by Managing Director Santosh Koshy Thomas, KINFRA underwent a transformation. That is how KINFRA achieved its brilliant achievements.

1. Entrepreneurs have been informed that parks are ready in Kerala for setting up various industries. For this, the marketing system was strengthened. Today the land in KINFRA's parks does not lie idle. In order to achieve that, the Planning & Business Development System has been strengthened

2. Arrangements have been made to follow up on every inquiry that arrives at KINFRA. There is a well-equipped call centre system here. Made a list of inquiries that come in each month. The system was set up to realize all the possibilities in them

3. The licensing system was expedited. If an entrepreneur submits an application, the land or factory building will be allotted within 15 days. This is due to the joint efforts of all the agencies under the Industries Department. This is possible because everyone, including the general managers of the District Industrial Centre, works like an oiled machine. At the same time, the 'Ease



KINFRA Rubber Park, Irupuram



KINFRA Seafood Park, Aroor



KINFRA Textile Centre, Kannur

of 'Doing Business' ideas adopted under the leadership of the Minister of Industries and the Principal Secretary of the Department have contributed to the current progress.

4. Adopted decentralised working style. The state is divided into three zones. South, Central, North. Parks in these zones are the responsibility of the respective officials. This makes decentralisation possible so that a rapid assessment can take place in the first instance. Decisions can be made in all other zones except policy matters. From the top to the bottom of KINFRA, each team member has specific responsibilities. Everyone has a clear idea about it. It also works together to make it work better.

5. Parks were set up knowing the needs and possibilities of the ventures.

6. In the first phase, investors were given the opportunity to acquire land without incurring huge expenses. Those who own land or factories in KINFRA Parks

need to pay only 20 per cent of the price in the first instance. The remaining 80 per cent can be repaid in five years without interest. This is a great blessing for entrepreneurs. They can invest the amount of space they need in the business.

Best support

In Kerala, it was once unheard of to follow up with entrepreneurs with accurate information from the government office seeking information on industrial facilities. But that is what KINFRA is doing today. Anyone looking for space in KINFRA Park will get the right answer. Everything they need will be done on time.

Don't think that these fortunes are only for new entrepreneurs. 'KINFRA's brand ambassadors are entrepreneurs currently working at KINFRA Park. KINFRA is a team that believes that entrepreneurs must be successful for the economic development of our

state. The KINFRA team therefore takes a proactive approach to the needs of entrepreneurs.

"The KINFRA team seeks to form associations in each park and provide all possible support there. The change is obvious," says Santosh Koshy Thomas, who has led KINFRA for two years. While the entrepreneurs themselves became the brand ambassadors of KINFRA, it was also reflected in the allotment of parks space. This can be seen from the land allotment scale from 2016-17 financial year to the first week of February in the 2020-2021 financial year.

In the first three financial years 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19, less than 90 acres of land was allotted to entrepreneurs. However, in 2019-20, 224.82 acres of land was allotted. As on the first week of February in the financial year 2020-21, it was 185.99 acres. Sales of built-up space at Standard Design Factory have also seen a huge jump over the past two years. As on the first week of February, 2,53,550.47 sq ft of built-up space has been allotted in 2020-21.

KINFRA is stepping into the entrepreneurial community by joining hands with leading organisations in the industrial and commercial sectors of the state. Versatile activities have been adopted for this purpose.

KINFRA now offers a guarantee that those who come to start a venture in Kerala are much desired. We respect the entrepreneurs' ideas, efforts and first aspirations. Go forward boldly. We are with you.

Tea with the Taliban?

With the US withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan, India has been pushed out of its comfort zone. It may have to consider the once unthinkable policy of sitting down with the Taliban to stay relevant in Kabul and protect its interests in the region

BY MANDIRA NAYAR
PHOTOGRAPHS BY EMANUELE SATOLLI

EVERYDAY BATTLE
A member of a Taliban
faction in Herat province



It took prime minister PV. Narasimha Rao less than an hour to relay a message back to the Indian ambassador in Kabul: to grant ousted Afghanistan president Dr Mohammad Najibullah asylum in India and fly him out of the war-torn country. It was not an easy decision. The mujahideen, destined to be the new rulers, would never forget and forgive. The situation was precarious. Civil war had broken out and there was intense regional rivalry. Najib's family had been flown out to Delhi two weeks earlier. A plane waited on the tarmac for him. Benon Sevan, head of the United Nations humanitarian aid division to Afghanistan, was to accompany him to ensure his safety.

But on that fateful morning of April 17, 1992, Najib's convoy could not clear the penultimate security barricade at Kabul airport. Abdul Rashid Dostam, the warlord who controlled the airport, had switched sides. But Rao refused to give Najib sanctuary in the Indian embassy, fearing a backlash against Indians in Afghanistan. Najib was forced to take refuge in the UN compound, where he stayed for four years until his gruesome execution by the Taliban.

The episode offers a glimpse of the complexity of India's engagement with Afghanistan and the intricate interplay of history, emotions,



hard-nosed diplomacy, strategic interests, capabilities and choices. It also serves as an example of India's commitment and the extent of its involvement—a legacy that has continued since the days of prime minister Morarji Desai.

With the US troops all set to withdraw completely on September 11, ending two decades of occupation, history repeats once again in Afghanistan. The emerging situation mirrors the Soviet Union's pull-out in 1988-89, and could lead to instability

in the region. The Covid-19 pandemic could further worsen the situation. For India, it has come as a major strategic and diplomatic nightmare. From offering support to the beleaguered Afghan government and dealing with US pressure to dealing with the Pakistan factor, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has his task cut out.

The countdown has begun. The Americans, tired of the longest war in their country's history, are determined to leave, although the Afghan government does not seem ready.

"I now have a set of orders," General Scott Miller, commander of United States Forces-Afghanistan and NATO's Resolute Support Mission, said on April 25. "We will conduct an orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan, and that means transitioning bases and equipment to the Afghan security forces." The confirmation came two weeks after President Joe Biden announced that he would pull the remaining 3,500 troops out. Around 7,000 NATO and allied forces will also leave by the September deadline.



With the US set to leave without securing guarantees from the Taliban about severing its links with Al Qaeda, the chances of the group turning moderate seem remote.

What is more worrying is the departure of a majority of the 18,000 private military contractors, which will force Afghan military and police personnel—said to be around three lakh strong—to fend for themselves. “The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) is capable of giving a fight and could hold on to the main cities for a while,” said Rana Banerji, former special secretary, cabinet secretariat. But American financial support will be crucial.

TOUGH LESSONS

Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi, a senior leader of a Taliban faction, with his followers in Herat

There is a lot at stake. Violence has spiralled out of control and the Taliban now controls 52 per cent of Afghanistan. The UN has reported 1,783 civilian casualties (573 killed and 1,210 injured) from January to March, a 29 per cent increase compared with the same period last year. “The Taliban has not changed. It has not cut its ties with Al Qaeda and it offers a breeding ground for more than 22 terrorist groups,” said Aref Dostyar, Afghan consul general to the western US. The Afghanistan government recently reported the arrest of 408 foreign fighters of Islamic State of which 299 came from Pakistan. “It would be very difficult to keep the Taliban in check. The only way forward is a strong Afghan government backed and supported by the region and the international community,” said Dostyar.

With the US set to leave without securing guarantees from the Taliban about severing its links with Al Qaeda, the chances of the group turning moderate seem remote at the moment. The Doha Agreement negotiated by the Americans to frame the terms of their withdrawal is dead in the water; a US-backed peace conference scheduled for April 24 in Istanbul had to be postponed after the Taliban refused to show up. “The Taliban has already chalked up its victory,” said Arash Yaqin, researcher at the Washington, DC-based Institute of World Politics. “It does not need to show up for the last part, it is on vacation till September 11.”

The coming months will see more conferences to hammer out a peace deal. Russia, Iran and Pakistan will continue to play a role in this race to negotiate with the Taliban. India, however, will have to wait and watch. It will also have to come to terms



with the reality that dealing with the Taliban will become a necessity in the future.

The odds may be stacked against it, but the Afghan government is unlikely to collapse immediately after the withdrawal of US forces. The crucial factor will be whether the US continues to support the ANDSF, which is crucial to keeping the Taliban forces at bay. For instance, air support provided by the coalition forces proved critical in repelling a fierce Taliban attack on Kunduz, a strategic city in northern Afghanistan, last May. But the challenge for the government will also be political.

In an exclusive interview with *THE WEEK*, Mohammed Umer Daudzai, Afghanistan's special envoy to

Pakistan, said keeping the state and its vital institutions together after the US withdrawal would be the biggest challenge. And India will have a key role to play in this. There is no doubt that New Delhi will work behind the scenes to manage differences and to build consensus within and outside to shore up the stability of the institutions. But the process is not going to be easy.

"The walls are closing in on President Ashraf Ghani," said Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the Wilson Center, Washington, D.C. "He is increasingly isolated at home, with his rivals trying to undercut him, and he is under great pressure from Washington to agree to things he does not want to

do—such as stepping aside for the formation of a new interim government that would not include him. But one cannot circumvent the president. He can't simply be ignored."

India has thrown its weight behind Ghani. In November, New Delhi pledged an additional \$80 million in aid to the Ghani government at a time when it was clear that the intra-Afghan talks were floundering. India was possibly sending a message to the Taliban that it would back democracy.

The hurried American exit gives the Taliban more bargaining power, but it also takes away its biggest propaganda tool—being the rallying point for fighting foreign occupation. "I think this is a great opportunity,"



TURF WAR

Members of a faction of the Taliban; (above) Taliban fighters in Nerkh

said Afghanistan National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib at the recently-concluded Raisina Dialogue, India's premier multilateral conference on geopolitics. "The Taliban has no reason to continue its violence in Afghanistan anymore. And I think it is time for it to make real peace with the Afghan government and become part of the mainstream political society," US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, too, made a similar point while testifying at a senate foreign relations committee hearing on April 27. The Taliban "can embrace a negotiated path to peace, make the transition from a violent insurgency to a political movement, and join their

fellow Afghans in a nation that enjoys respect in the global community," said Khalilzad. "But if they obstruct a negotiated settlement and instead pursue a military takeover, they will be opposed not only by the United States but by our allies, partners, and the region."

The withdrawal of the US will also mark the beginning of a new chapter for India. "India will be pushed out of its comfort zone," said Rakesh Sood, former Indian ambassador to Afghanistan. Daudzai said India should reach out to the Taliban and warned that India's self-isolation would not help. Daudzai is not the only one who has asked India to engage with the Taliban. Khalilzad, too, has been pressing India to open up channels of communication. While India still remains opposed to any direct talks, its position on the Taliban has softened considerably. For instance, India sent a "non-official" delegation of two retired diplomats to the 2018 Moscow peace conference on Afghanistan and Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar took part in the Doha conference held last year. The Mos-

cow conference was the first time an Indian delegation was present at the same table with Taliban representatives.

"We are open to the Taliban within an inclusive Afghanistan," said Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, former Indian ambassador to Afghanistan who reopened the embassy in 2001. It may not be easy for Modi and the BJP, still scarred by the 1999 Indian Airlines flight hijack. Engaging the Taliban was debated actively within Indian security circles before the hijack. But the humiliation in Kandahar put an end to those initiatives.

There has been chatter about appointing a special envoy to engage with the Taliban, on the lines of the back channel mechanism India has had with Pakistan for years. The Taliban, too, has tried to step up contacts with India. Indian intelligence agencies have third party contacts, too. Daudzai told THE WEEK that the Taliban reportedly reached out to India 24 times. It has also been trying to address India's biggest concern, Pakistan. Last May, Taliban spokesperson in Doha, Suhail Shaheen,

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Fighters of a Taliban
faction in Herat

clarified that his organisation had never participated in the jihad in Kashmir.

"India's role as a [provider of] development is something that even the Taliban recognises," said T.C.A. Raghavan, one of the diplomats who attended the Moscow conference. "We should sit tight and wait for the Taliban to come to us. Which they will, as long as we keep our powder dry."

Over the past two decades, India has emerged the strongest development partner for Afghanistan, with investments worth \$3 billion. It may not be a big amount, but each project executed by India, including the construction of the parliament building, has won goodwill many times over. Other key Indian contributions include the Salma dam and the Zaranj-Delaram highway project. "I think, in all the 34 Afghan provinces, we have development projects of some kind," said Jaishankar at the Raisina Dialogue. "In the last 20 years, we have demonstrated through our actions and projects on the ground, what our real feelings are for Afghanistan." The India-Afghanistan air freight corridor set up in 2018 to offset the challenge posed by the absence of direct road links has been another success story. It has so far helped transport more than 5,000 metric tonnes of Afghan products in over 500 flights to India.

Apart from the multiple brick and mortar projects, India has also helped in repairing the social fabric of the war-torn nation. For instance, cricketer Rashid Khan, who is Afghanistan's most famous youth icon, rose to international fame through the Indian Premier League. Moreover, according to a study published jointly by the Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation and the Wilson Center, 16,000



Afghan students now pursue higher education in India. In the last two decades, over 60,000 students have been educated in India. It is this multifaceted development plank that has brought India into the room—without having any other leverage with the Taliban—to discuss Afghanistan.

"At Bonn 1 (the 2001 conference held there to discuss Afghanistan's political transition after the US invasion), India was invited because it had been a key supporter of the Northern Alliance, along with Russia and Iran," said Sood. "Today, India is being invited because it has acquired the distinction of being a preferred development partner. This realisation is not lost on the Taliban either,

which has been supportive of India's developmental role."

The question is whether India can now stay in the room and raise its voice for Afghanistan and the aspiration of the country's young population. "There is a general feeling that we should be part of the peace process. The Afghans think we will be helpful," said Mukhopadhyaya. The Taliban too, would like India's stamp of legitimacy and want to benefit from its development largesse.

Any engagement with the Taliban, however, brings up the fundamental question of Pakistan. "In a way, we are reacting to downstream solutions that do not address the real source of the problem—the Taliban safe



The question is whether India can now stay in the room and raise its voice for Afghanistan and the aspiration of the country's young population.

havens in Pakistan and Pakistan's covert strategic and logistic support for the Taliban to keep the Afghan pot boiling so that it can never stand on its own feet," said Mukhopadhyaya. "That would be falling for the Pakistani narrative in which the focus is always on Afghanistan, the region or the UN, but never on Pakistan. It allows the US to exit discreetly."

There is no doubt that Pakistan continues to hold sway over the Taliban. Tasked with bringing the group to the negotiating table, Pakistan has managed to evade stricter measures. "Washington will not want to lose Pakistan," said Yaqin. "It has the atomic bomb."

There are, however, those who believe that reality on the ground has changed for Pakistan, despite the fact that the Inter-Services Intelligence does control the Haqqani network, a major Taliban faction, and that Sirajuddin Haqqani is the deputy leader of the Taliban. With the rise of the Pashtun movement in Pakistan and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which staged a comeback on April 21 by engineering a blast in the parking lot of a luxury hotel in Quetta, a powerful Taliban in Kabul might be a problem. "They [the Taliban and the TTP] have a connection at the moment," said Yaqin. "The TTP is a real problem and so is the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). Pakistan does not want a strong Pashtun orthodox party." The question, however, remains whether Pakistan will abandon its policy of strategic depth in the west for regional peace.

Not banking entirely on the moderate Taliban scenario, India is keeping other options open. With its legacy of backing democracy in Kabul and having been lauded for harbouring no vested interests, India would want to tread carefully and would not want to be seen as betraying old friends. New Delhi has recently hosted a few prominent non-Pashtun leaders. Dostum came

in September and held discussions with Jaishankar. He also met with foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla. The powerful former Northern Alliance commander Ismail Khan was in Delhi in April.

With villagers stockpiling guns fearing uncertainty and war, Afghanistan's future is likely to be bloody. Added to the ethnic divisions that are likely to flare up, there will be intense regional rivalries beyond the India-Pakistan dynamic, which could further exacerbate the crisis. Key players like China, Russia and Iran are likely to get involved more actively once the Americans check out. The UAE, too, has become quite active diplomatically in the region and is seen to be undercutting the growing influence wielded by Qatar, its regional rival.

The future will, however, depend on ground reality within Afghanistan, which has a young population with aspirations that cannot be fulfilled by a war or a return to the Islamic Emirate. The median age in Afghanistan is just 18.4 years. "We have nowhere to go. If we cannot defend our motherland, what can we defend," asked Zubair Massoud, nephew of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the anti-Taliban guerrilla leader who was assassinated in 2001. Zubair, who graduated from the National Defence Academy in Pune, now serves in the Afghan army.

"We now live in a different Afghanistan, an Afghanistan which has gone through 20 years of a new experiment," said Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif. He said the Taliban would not be able to go back to the 1990s whether or not its ideology and approach had changed. But engaging the group will be quite crucial for other key players. "Whatever we think of the Taliban, it is a reality," said Zarif. "It needs to be engaged, but based on democratic terms, not based on anybody's individual, self-serving terms." ●



Morarji Desai (1977-1979)

When the Soviet Union, strategic ally and economic partner to India, invaded Afghanistan, Desai and his external affairs minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee chose to defy it. They considered the USSR to be close to the Congress. India voted with the US and other western countries at the UN, demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops



Charan Singh (1979-1980)

Caretaker prime minister; powerless to take any decision



Indira Gandhi (1980-1984)

In her second term, Indira restored relations with the Soviet Union and reversed India's stand at the UN. Rajesh Mishra, the Indian permanent representative at the UN, left the Indian Foreign Service and joined the UN. As Pakistan, sponsor of the anti-Soviet mujahideen, also sponsored Khalistani terrorism, the prime minister publicly supported Soviet leadership

KABUL CONNECTIONS

Joe Biden said he was the fourth US president handling the war in Afghanistan and that he did not want to pass it on to a fifth president. Though India did not have troop deployment to Afghanistan, Indian prime ministers have been forced to make difficult choices since the late 1970s. Here is how they responded:



P.V. Narasimha Rao (1991-1996)

The Soviet Union had collapsed in December 1990. Rao was confronted with the stock market scam and the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Najibullah was ousted and sought asylum in India. Rao agreed. But, the US, which perceived Najibullah as a threat, put intense pressure on India to delay his exfiltration. He took shelter in a UN compound in Kabul; India was reluctant to give him refuge in its embassy for the fear of reprisal against the Indian community in Afghanistan. As the Taliban advanced, winning province after province, India supported the northern alliance of Tajik and Uzbek warlords in their fight against it



H.D. Deve Gowda (1996-1997)

Gujral returned as external affairs minister. The minority government, which was supported by the Congress, continued with Rao's policies as the Taliban tightened its grip over Afghanistan. This gave strategic depth to Pakistan, which became more belligerent on the border. The Taliban captured Kabul, executed Najibullah and hung him from a lamp post outside the presidential palace. India retaliated by saying that it would not have any dealings with it



I.K. Gujral (1997-1998)

The shun-Taliban policy continued even as a remorseful India supported Afghan forces opposing it



Rajiv Gandhi (1984-1989)

Continued public support to Soviet Union; privately, he urged Moscow to end the military occupation of Afghanistan. He was buffeted by the increasing violence in Punjab and the suspicion of intelligence agencies that Pakistan's ISI was using mujahideen to foment unrest in Jammu and Kashmir. The Soviet Union underwent radical changes with the ascent of reformer Mikhail Gorbachev, who wanted to end the war



V.P. Singh (1989-1990)

His term saw the withdrawal of Soviet troops and installation of Mohammad Najibullah's leftist government, with which the mujahideen continued to wage war. Influx of Afghan refugees to India began. Foreign minister I.K. Gujral wanted to be friendly with Pakistan and work for peace in Afghanistan, but the kidnapping of Union home minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed's daughter Rubaiya in Srinagar changed the policy towards Pakistan



Chandra Shekhar (1990-1991)

Both Soviet Union and Afghanistan in turmoil. Despite facing a financial crisis, Chandra Shekhar sent critical financial support to the Najibullah government, upsetting the mujahideen, the newly growing Taliban and Pakistan



Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004)

The hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane forced India to release terrorists in exchange for the passengers and crew. The assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud jolted India, as he was the focus of its support to the anti-Taliban forces. Within hours of Massoud's assassination, the world was stunned by the 9/11 attacks. India provided logistical help to the US, which launched its war on terror. Taliban leader Mullah Omar fled to Pakistan



Manmohan Singh (2004-2014)

India helped the civilian government of Hamid Karzai, even as it helped build the Chabahar port in Iran for transshipment of goods to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The proposal for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline fell through because of tensions between India and Pakistan. Indian engineers, workers and diplomats were targeted by Taliban and Al Qaeda terrorists. But India expanded its consulates to the most troubled provinces, and trained Afghanistan military and police



Narendra Modi (2014-present)

US plans to end the war in Afghanistan put pressure on Modi. The government expanded its relations with Central Asia, Russia, China and Iran, all of which are at odds with the US. But India is also growing militarily close to the US; there is subtle pressure for Indian troops to replace the forces that the US is pulling out. India again refused to hold direct talks with the Taliban. In response to the announcement of withdrawal of US troops before September 9, India, which had long prepared for the consequences, strengthened its support to the moderate, democratic forces in Kabul

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Mohammed Umer Daudzai
*Afghanistan's special envoy
to Pakistan*



Taliban has reached out to India 24 times

BY MANDIRA NAYAR

Mohammed Umer Daudzai has been entrusted with the task of attempting political reconciliation with its eastern neighbour. In the past, he has served as President Ashraf Ghani's special envoy for regional consensus building on peace and as the head of the High Peace Council secretariat. When IC-814 hijack happened in December 1999, Daudzai was working with the United Nations Development Programme and spent 10 days on the Kandahar tarmac with Indian negotiators. Speaking to THE WEEK from his office in Kabul, Daudzai said it was "critically important" for India to engage with the Taliban. Edited excerpts from the interview:

Q/ What would be your main challenges after the US withdrawal?

A/ Can we keep the state and its vital institutions together after the withdrawal? That will be our biggest challenge. If we manage to keep our key institutions together, we can manage the rest.

Q/ You have been made special envoy to Pakistan to try and bring the Taliban to the table. You were assigned this task earlier by former president Hamid Karzai as well. How is it different this time?

A/ Back in 2011, Kabul was much stronger and much more coherent. The institutions were growing and the international support was unwavering. US-Pakistan relations were also much worse. But now I see for the first time that the Pakistani army and the government are on the same page. Back then, we were dealing with two states.

I also feel that Pakistan is concerned about the full-fledged return of the Taliban. There is fear about the domino effect it will have on Pakistan. Back then, there was no Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, there was no other terrorist group that was hurting Pakistan, too. Now they are there. Pakistan is worried about a Taliban regime in Kabul. There will be natural resistance against the Taliban in many parts of the country. Also, anti-Pakistani terrorist groups may take shelter in empty spaces in Afghanistan and may try and hurt Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region.

The Taliban is no longer as loyal



to Pakistan as it used to be. It is expanding its relationship with Russia, Iran and the Arab countries. We have to look at the similarities between now and 2011 and also at the differences. Those differences are the positive messages for us. We have to work on them.

Q/ You are saying there is a realisation in Pakistan that if the Taliban takes over Kabul, it might hurt Pakistan.

A/ I have been dealing with Pakistan for 40 years. The Pakistanis have various layers of policy options and they work on what suits them best. I think a moderate Afghanistan, which is friendlier with Pakistan than before, might suit their interests. Now, can they fit the Taliban

within that moderate state? It is Pakistan's challenge and our challenge, too. That is our common ground and that is what we are talking about.

Q/ What about India's concern that even if a moderate Taliban controls Afghanistan, it will be more friendly towards Pakistan?

A/ What I am talking about is a state that incorporates the Taliban as well. With respect to India, I am hearing for the first time the Pakistan army chief using the term geo-economic interest. In the past, the Pakistanis were not interested in that. It was always geopolitical and geo-security. Now they are talking about regional connectivity. With the level of misunderstanding between the countries, how can we ensure regional connectivity? Things have to change on the western front in Pakistan's view and they will have to bring some changes on the eastern front. There are some openings, I understand. At least they tell me that they have some initial openings of dialogue with the other side, too.

Q/ The other side being India?

A/ Yes. I see an increasingly shifting narrative in Pakistan. It is no longer so black and white that India is an enemy and that your enemy's friend is your enemy. I think the

Pakistanis are thinking much more openly. A lot of things are changing around us. But, mind you, our current thinking coincides with the term of [Pakistan army chief] General Qamar Bajwa. We don't know whether his successor will think exactly like he does.

Q/ Do you think Pakistan can deliver?

A/ Not 100 per cent. Pakistan and the Taliban no longer share the kind of relationship they used to do in the past. But Pakistan still enjoys a certain degree of influence and that is what we expect it to use positively. I do not think Pakistan controls the Taliban anymore. The simple fact is that the Taliban has other options within the region.

Q/ Would you elaborate on the other options?

A/ The Taliban has a very different relationship with Iran. They were on the verge of war in 1998. Now they have very good relations. There is suspicion that Iran might even be supplying it with arms. The Taliban enjoys good relations with Russia and China, too. Now, what does the Taliban need from those relationships? Basically, finances and weapons. At the moment, however, there are plenty of finances and weapons available within Afghanistan. So, what the Taliban needs is political recognition. Two years ago, it was a terrorist group and nobody wanted to talk to it. Today, there is a race to meet with the Taliban, talk to its leaders and host them. It is no longer dependent on Pakistan.

FRIENDS IN NEED

Two Taliban fighters greet each other during a meeting in Nerkh in Wardak province



Q/ Will the growing legitimacy stop Taliban from going to the negotiating table? What could be the endgame?

A/ When it comes to legitimacy, one is the political legitimacy outside the country, which the Taliban has earned, like in the case of former US president Donald Trump calling the group his "friend". But it will lose another legitimacy if it does not come quickly to the negotiating table, that is its local, village legitimacy. When the US forces were in Afghanistan, the Taliban was telling the villagers that their country was occupied and, as per their tradition, they should fight. And the villagers were joining the Taliban. Now that the US forces are withdrawing, the Taliban is gaining more on the external front, but it will lose more on the internal front.

The endgame for us is a moderate state which incorporates the Taliban. I think it is possible.

Q/ One country that has not opened any channel to the Taliban has been India. There have been various attempts to get India to talk to the Taliban.

A/ I visited India in 2015, when I was unemployed. I am grateful to

key policy-makers who allowed me to meet with them. I told them to open a channel of dialogue with the Taliban. They said the Taliban had contacted them 24 times, but they did not reply. I suggested giving the group a positive reply when it contacts them for the 25th time. I think it is already a little too late. India's self-isolation does not help.

What happened in 1999 with the Indian Airlines flight hijack was a very different episode. We are dealing with different leaders now. There is no longer Mullah Omar or Mullah Mansour. There are new field commanders. They love money. They have earned a lot of money. If they have become rich, they want to become businessmen in the future. They need to have friends in the region, outside Afghanistan, to do business with. My advice is, learn from the past experience, but open the channel of dialogues. And I know for sure, the Taliban will be more than happy to open that channel.

Q/ You believe that this is the hangover of 1999?

A/ Maybe. Maybe not. In 1999, you

know, I was on the ground for ten days, I saw the whole thing. If I was an Indian policy-maker, it wouldn't slip out of my mind. It would always be there till I am alive. I understand that there is a human dimension to that. But we have to overcome that.

Q/ Do you think India can help in keeping the institutions together in Afghanistan?

A/ The biggest challenge is the flow of finances. We cannot fund the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) from our revenues. There are also challenges of the political management of the ANDSF. Moreover, there are problems with our social fabric, we are still not one united, cohesive nation. We still have those ethnic, linguistic issues. India can play a key role such as providing financial and political support and help in creating a politically cohesive environment. India is the most popular country in Afghanistan. When you are the most popular country, you can do a lot. **●**

KEEPING VIGIL

Fighters of a Taliban faction stand guard in Herat province



HOLISTIC HELP

India's assistance to Afghanistan



AT LEAST ONE PROJECT
IN EVERY PROVINCE



In November 2020, India pledged **100** projects worth **\$80 million**; this included the **Shaatoot Dam, Kabul**, for drinking water

500 annual scholarships for higher education in Indian universities	500 scholarships and training slots for Afghan public servants in Indian professional institutions	2,50,000 metric tonnes of wheat	5 Indian Medical Mission clinics	3 Airbus aircraft (plus spare parts)
---	--	---	---	---

OTHER ASSISTANCE

Small development projects, renovation of Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health (Kabul), ambulances, TV satellite downlink/transmitter, desks and benches for schools, buses, tube wells, solar panels, computer training centres, toilet complexes

SOURCE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S./ RESEARCH MANDIRA NAYAR

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef
founding member, Taliban



Taliban will not allow Afghan territory to be used against India

BY MANDIRA NAYAR

Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef was one of the founding members of the Taliban. He was the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan when the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001, after the 9/11 terror attacks. A year later, Pakistan handed over him to the US. He was sent to Guantanamo Bay, where

he spent four and a half years in detention. Back now in Afghanistan, Zaeef is no longer a formal member of the Taliban, but he is actively associated with the group. In an exclusive interview with THE WEEK, Zaeef spoke about the importance of a political compromise to find a solution to the Afghan crisis. He said it was absolutely important for India and the Taliban to talk directly and

resolve all outstanding issues. Excerpts:

Q/ Do you think the Taliban and the Afghanistan government will continue to fight?

A/ Eventually, the Taliban and the people know that fighting is not the solution. The end will only be through a political solution. The Taliban does not recognise the elected government of Afghanistan, which it thinks is a puppet government propped up by America, working for the benefit of the Americans. The government, meanwhile, does not recognise the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. That is the problem.

Q/ Do you think a compromise is possible?

A/ Yes. I think there is no other way. The people of Afghanistan are tired of the continued fighting, they can't take the burden any more. Also, all countries (in the neighbourhood) agree that a stable Afghanistan is necessary, and that war is not the solution.

Q/ You have talked about stability in the region. How do you see the role of Pakistan?

A/ Afghanistan will only be for Afghans. It will be a neutral country. It will not be against any country, nor

TOUGH TERRAIN

A fighter of a Taliban faction



will it be used by any country. (Afghans) will convince all concerned countries that Afghanistan will be a safe and a neutral country to have a good relationship with and to do business with.

I know the competition between Pakistan and India in Afghanistan, which is damaging the people and also the sovereignty of the country. This will be stopped completely. Afghanistan will have a good relationship with Pakistan, India, Iran and other neighbours. We will not allow the soil of Afghanistan to be used against anyone. When the peace agreement and the intra-Afghan dialogue come up in future and reach a conclusion, this will be agreed upon. I know the concerns of India, and of other countries. I know the interests of Pakistan, too.

Q/ India has said that it will provide military help to Afghanistan.

A/ India will try to support the administration. Once there is peace in Afghanistan, we will not need military aid or equipment from any country. We want to see a neutral country. We do not want to see any competition—between India and Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Russia and America or between China and America—in Afghanistan. It is not possible for a small country to (be a venue for) all this competition. Our relationship with all countries will be based on respect, help and cooperation.

Q/ You are a founding member of the Taliban. Has the Taliban changed? Will the new Afghanistan be democratic?

A/ I am not with the Taliban now. I am independent, but I study the group and its members. They are my brothers, and I feel their pain. When we started in 1993, we had no experience and did not even know the geography. We were not aware of the power and the influence of the Americans. We did not know about India and its interests, or the global interest in Afghanistan. Now the Taliban knows everything. It knows the interests and concerns of other countries. It knows how Afghanistan will be in the future.

I cannot say whether there will be a democratic government or an Islamic government, it depends on the nego-

tiations between the Taliban and the present government.

Q/ But will it have space for women?

A/ Of course. I was sitting with the Taliban in Moscow and in the conference in Doha. The Taliban agreed that women's rights would be respected in Afghanistan, although women would not be given the top position of the emir. But in all other positions and fields such as politics and business, women would be involved.

Q/ Do you think India has reached out to the Taliban?

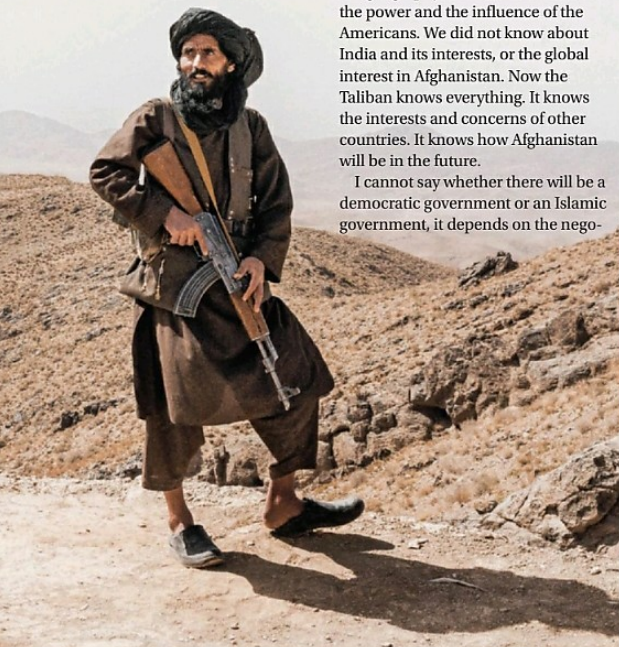
A/ It is necessary for India and the Taliban to reach out, share the concerns and find solutions through negotiations. It is important for peace in Afghanistan. I know India's concerns. I am sure that the Taliban will not be working with Pakistan to damage India. But the distance between India and the Taliban is increasing, which is a concern. This is not good.

Q/ After Islamic State, there is the fear of Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K).

A/ Islamic State was brought to Afghanistan by the intelligence just to put pressure on the Taliban. My understanding is that Islamic State has no place in Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan don't accept the idea. Islamic State has been repulsed by the Taliban. It does not have even a single base in Afghanistan.

Q/ Pakistan and the Taliban have deep connections. What will the Taliban do if Pakistan forces it to keep India out?

A/ The Taliban policy is very clear about that. The territory of Afghanistan will not be used against anyone. The future of Afghanistan will be as a neutral country. Its territory will not be used against any other country. If India and Pakistan want to fight, they have a long border and they can do it there. But not here in Afghanistan. ●





My YouTube lunch

Until the devastating second wave, I had never stepped into the kitchen. So, with both Bikesh, our cook, and my mom temporarily incapacitated with Covid-19, I decided this was a chance to do penance for my past domestic hedonism. As my dad and me tried to run the house without Ma, I told my dad to chill, and that I would handle the kitchen. He looked amused and said, "I've given your mother and Bikesh breakfast, you do lunch. There's *parwal* (pointed gourd) in the fridge, so how about *aaloo parwal*?" I nodded with more confidence than I deserved to possess on matters culinary.

I entered the kitchen armed with YouTube on my phone and began to watch a recipe. It mentioned that you had to boil the potatoes. I realised I didn't know how to. I googled. In a pressure cooker, said Google. I didn't know where it was. I gingerly asked my dad who looked smug and came and pulled out a pressure cooker from a drawer I did not know existed. "The handle is broken," I said, a faint pettiness creeping into me. "Too bad," retorted my dad. It was now a matter of pride.

I followed the instructions on Google; while the potatoes boiled, I began to chop the *parwal* and fry it. I put too little oil and the *parwal* became squidgy. I added oil. Cold oil into the inadequately sautéed *parwal*. Dad, the soothsayer, appeared at my shoulder. "I may not know how to cook, but I sure know that if you add cold oil to hot oil with *sabzi* in it, the *sabzi* will taste odd," he said gravely.

"Please go away, dad," I hissed! I looked in the fridge for fresh *parwal*, but alas there were none. I cursed softly. Godot, our dog, appeared in the kitchen, his frown lines and cocked ear predicting a culinary doomsday. I offered him an oily *parwal*. He sniffed at it tentatively, summarily rejected it and trotted out of the kitchen. Desperate, I had a brainwave. I washed the *parwal* with warm water. Now it was oily and wet. Text from Ma, "Everything okay, *beta*?" I can talk

you through making *parwal* on a video call."

Of course, dad must have snatched on me. "All good, *ma*. Just rest." And a thumbs up was the reply. I exhaled. There was a hissing sound. I started. The damn potatoes! I examined the cooker and realised that the rubber on the lid was cracked. In the cooker were six singed potatoes and very little water. *Shit!* Dad reappeared on the horizon. He was holding an A4 size paper that said: We can order.

"No need, dad. Please leave me alone!" This was now war!

I scraped away the burnt portion of the potatoes and found that I had a palmful of potato mash that was cooked and edible. My washed *parwal* was there, too. I went back to YouTube and began to follow the remainder of the recipe carefully. Soon, a somewhat familiar aroma rose from the kadhai. No disasters it seemed. The *aaloo parwal* was ready. It looked familiar, but sloppy! And it was barely enough for one person. I looked at my watch. This took me 45 minutes!

Dad reappeared. "What will we eat the vegetable with? You have to prepare that, too."

"Thank you, dad," I growled!

Prepare, the word, got stuck in my head. I had a Newton moment. Prepare. I do not need to cook. Prepare: to make ready. I took my phone and texted a friend who lives in the colony.

"Have you guys cooked? Can you make some extra *dal*, *chawal* and *sabzi* and send it to my place. Mom and cook down with Covid." Sad smiley added. In half an hour there was fragrant Bengali cuisine in neatly packed vessels lying on my dining table.

My father video-called my mother, smug as ever. *Ma* saw the food and exclaimed in doubt primarily, "Did you cook this, *beta*?"

"No," I said, "I prepared it for you."

The second wave exposed numerous failures. Some structural and moral as in the case of the government. Some personal and culinary as in yours truly!

The writer is an award-winning Bollywood actor and sometime writer and social commentator.

**ASHES TO
ASHES**

A mass
cremation of
people died
of Covid-19 at
Channenahalli
village near
Bengaluru

Clash of the mutants

Double mutant
variant. Triple
mutant. Confused?
THE WEEK decodes
the mutations
and variants of an
evolving virus

BY REKHA DIXIT

Mea culpa, rues Anurag Agarwal. Head of the CSIR-Institute for Genomics and Integrative Biology (CSIR-IGIB) in New Delhi, Agarwal coined the term 'double mutant', which has become the buzzword in India now. But he says he never intended it to be part of the common parlance.

"We were writing a scientific note, where we were describing a new Variant of Concern (VoC) that had been found," says Agarwal. This variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which they first identified in Maharashtra, had several mutations, as is the normal case with newer generations of viruses. However, among those mutations, two were of particular interest, since they showed "immune escape" in vitro. This means that when geneticists cultured virus genomes in the lab and subjected them to extreme antibody pressure, which should effectively neutralise the virus, some mutations still survived.

Using a method of nomenclature called Pango (there are multiple nomenclature methods, which cause much confusion even among the scientific community, forget laypersons), they identified this variant by a most uninteresting sounding name called B.1.617, flagging two of the various mutations. These mutations are E484Q and L452R, which are simply codes for the point on the genome at which a particular amino acid (indicated by the letter) is replaced by another. "While writing the paper, we had to repeatedly talk about the variant, and I referred to it at some point as the double mutant," explains Agarwal.

This catchy word was first heard in public on March 24, when Union health secretary Rajesh Bhushan used it in his briefing. And before they knew it, the term was banded around by just about everyone. It also caused a measure of concern, with people beginning to mistakenly believe that the double mutation made the virus a worse enemy than the ancestral Wuhan strand.

A few weeks later, two developments happened. Some scientists noted that there was another mutation, P681R, on the B.1.617 variant that was "interesting" because this mutation "probably helps the virus enter the host cell more easily," in the words of virologist Saumitra Das, who heads the National Institute of Biomedical Genomics (NIBMG), Kalyani, West Bengal. So, people began talking about the double mutant actually being a "triple mutant" and thereby even more fearsome. "It is the same variant—B.1.617," says Agarwal. "We were studying for immune escape, so we flagged



FAILED BY THE SYSTEM
A Covid-19 patient at LNJP Hospital in Delhi

the two mutations we connected to that trait. We had also noticed P681R, but in our story, it was only a sidekick; the protagonists were the first two. For someone else, who was looking for another characteristic, P681R became the star of the narrative."

But even before this confusion could be clarified, the NIBMG flagged yet another variant, B.1.618, which is prevailing in West Bengal. As it identified three mutations here, this, too, got referred to as the triple mutant, again, attributing to it triple the power for destruction. And so, there are now two triple mutants doing the rounds of the country, the Maharashtra double which is a triple, and the Bengal triple! 618, as it is best to call this variant, is still under study. It is not even classified as a VoC, says Das. It has not shown any potential to spread more virulently or attack more lethally.

The prevailing confusion is only natural, given the complicated, and not standardised, system for naming viruses and their variants. "The general public is usually not interested in virus names, and the existing system of numbers and letters work well for the scientific community, since we all know the codes, and can immediately identify the mutations by their names," says Agarwal in defence. Right from the ancestral genome (the Adam or Eve genome), the phylogenetic tree of a virus can be a mindboggling alphabet and numerical soup, as subsequent generations are clumped into clades and lineages and variants. Unsurprisingly, terms like double mutant or UK strain enter our vocabulary, all of which are so misleading.

The B.1.1.7 lineage, referred to as the UK variant, got its name because it was first identified in the UK;



J. SURESH

VACCINE COVERAGE

Percentage of population that got at least one dose in the five countries with most cases



Note: Countries with most cases as of April 27; Turkey at sixth is close behind Russia. People vaccinated as of April 26.

SOURCES OUR WORLD IN DATA, WHO

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.
RESEARCH KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

it does not mean it originated in the UK. Despite the stigma such names give to a place, they do become common. We have seen it with the Spanish Flu, Ebola, Nipha and Zika viruses and a host of diseases. Despite efforts of the scientific community to not associate the pandemic with China, the Wuhan connection remains indelible. The World Health Organization is working out a standardised nomenclature system, but while that may ease confusion among scientists, for the laypersons, it will still mostly be gobbledygook.

618 was first also referred to as the Indian variant, even though Bhushan insisted there is no such term. While his attempt was to ensure India does not get stigmatised, the fact is that given India's expanse, there cannot be one single Indian variant. Already, 617 is being called the Maharashtra variant, while 618 as the Bengal variant. But if yet another variant is reported from these states, what will that be called, asks Agarwal. "Right now, given the large number of cases, India must be having the largest pool of variants, too," notes Rakesh Mishra, head of the Hyderabad-based Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, adding that mutation is the nature of viruses. Only if a mutation is associated with a more severe infection or antibody resistance does it become a matter of concern.

Only if a mutation is associated with a more severe infection or antibody resistance does it become a matter of concern.

In fact, over the past year, the virus map of the country has changed dynamically. In the initial weeks, the Wuhan strand came to India, but quickly enough, a variant called D614G established itself all over India, says Mishra. It remained dominant till winter, when the UK variant came over by flights. This variant is known for higher infectivity or spread, but not necessarily higher morbidity in patients.

By December, the variant map of India began changing remarkably. The UK variant, despite being a VoC, was not contained properly, especially in north India. In Punjab, it now accounts for 90 per cent of the cases; in Delhi, for half the cases sampled, followed by the 617 variant. On the other hand, despite the international flights to Mumbai and Hyderabad, identification and quarantine of international passengers carrying this infection has meant that the UK variant is less established in the peninsula. While in Maharashtra, 617 is the most prevalent variant, elsewhere in the south, N440K is more commonly seen. "It is of no real consequence as it is not leading to any greater infectivity," says Mishra. The Brazil and South African variants are also seen in India, but in very low titre.

In West Bengal, 618 and 617 are vying for supremacy, and scientists feel that the more mobile 617 might become dominant and even edge out 618. The Uttar Pradesh surge is still a study in progress. While it is possible that due to proximity, Uttar Pradesh might have a similar variant pattern as Delhi, Sujeet Singh, head of National Centre for Disease Control, which is analysing



IMMEASURABLE LOSS

Umar Farooq of Srinagar measures a grave dug for his mother, who died of Covid-19

APP

samples from north India, says the picture will get clear once their analysis is done. Bengaluru's surge, say geneticists, is not dominated by any particular variant. Overall, in the country, the UK variant is the dominant one, largely because of the north Indian surge.

What does an understanding of these variants mean for the people? Nothing, say scientists. The spread of the virus remains the same, irrespective of the variant. So far, so is the treatment. Thus, the existing protocol for prevention works. "In Punjab, for instance, the UK variant is dominant, but any variant would have done the same job, when people were gathering in droves for protests and parties," points out Mishra.

These genomic studies are more for the understanding of researchers in epidemiological studies. A dynamic variant map will show how the infection is spreading, and therefore can be effectively used in epidemiological management, by physically cutting off the region from where it is spreading. The identification of 617 in the UK and Canada has shown the path of its travel.

Genomic studies also help in creating target medicines and vaccines. So far, there is no proven medicine for treating Covid-19. But studies show that existing treatment protocol and vaccines work

as effectively against all the existing variants. This is because mutations are only at a particular point, but the vaccine targets several points on the virus. Thus, even if one particular site shows an "immune escape" under laboratory conditions, the vaccine would still be able to target the virus as a whole. For the present, at least. Again, none of the mutations have changed the way the virus has spread, so mask, social distance and hand hygiene work against all. This is for the present. As for the future of infection, que sera sera (what will be, will be).

Tracking variants

Variant of Interest show changes in binding to receptor. They could have potential for reduced neutralisation by antibodies generated by a previous bout of infection or vaccination, potential diagnostic impact or predicted increase in disease transmissibility or severity. B.1.617 is mostly considered a VoI, B.1.618 may not even qualify as a VoI

Variant of Concern is a variant for which there is evidence of increased transmissibility and severity of disease, significant reduction in neutralisation by antibodies from previous infection or vaccination, reduced effectiveness of treatment and diagnostic detective failures. The UK variant is a VoC

SO₂S

Poor planning, internal squabbling and institutional smugness over containing the pandemic led to the oxygen crisis

BY REKHA DIXIT

BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

DIFFICULT TIMES

A Covid patient at a private hospital in Bengaluru



WHEN THE TSUNAMI hit India in 2004, the world offered to send relief material. India, however, politely refused the aid, saying it had the wherewithal to take care of its own. In the 15 years hence, India whittled down existing aid packages to almost a bare minimum. Instead, it positioned itself in the league of donors, increasing its development cooperation budget every year, rebuilding Afghanistan, taking care of the neighbourhood and reaching out to Africa.

India thought it was *atmanirbhar*, and had the basics of *roti, kapda, makaan* (food, clothing and shelter) almost sorted out; it had not imagined that it would have to go about asking for air to breathe. So, when a flight landed from the UK on April 27 with a donation of oxygen concentrators and ventilators, it gratefully accepted the charity. "Beg, borrow or steal [oxygen], it is a national emergency," the Delhi High Court recently told the Centre, as blood-numbing tales of patients dying for want of oxygen began pouring in from everywhere. Senior ministers and bureaucrats then began making desperate calls overseas. Subsequently, apart from the UK, France, Germany, Australia and Ireland have announced their aid packages; Russia and Kuwait are likely to do so, too. Even Bhutan, forever the recipient, has assured 40 metric tonnes of liquid oxygen daily. The US has made grand announcements, but not quantified the assistance so far. US Inc, from Amazon to Microsoft, has enumerated the assistance it will extend.

Meanwhile, the Indian Air Force rushed to ferry

emergency oxygen purchases from Singapore, Bangkok and Dubai, and to courier the gas from one part of the country to another. The Centre ordered a ban on industry use of oxygen, with exceptions like medical, pharmaceutical and defence.

For a nation, which till recently, was exporting oxygen, (in fact, its exports doubled over the last year), this clamour for oxygen, as well as essential medicines, is not only ironic, but also telling of the poor planning, internal squabbling and an institutional smugness over having supposedly suppressed the pandemic.

The second wave rose sharper than the first, yet, there was reaction time, if only the authorities had heeded. "The political class was busy with elections. The bureaucracy should have been alert; it is their job to prepare, plan and oversee crisis management," said former home secretary G.K. Pillai. "They had time, at least a few months to fill the gaps, create infrastructure... but they took their eyes off the ball."

The cost of this mismanagement is great in human life, but there is an economic loss, too. "Emergency purchases are at the price quoted. Are we importing at a price higher than we exported?" wondered Malancha Chakrabarty of Observer Research Foundation. "Would it not have been prudent to stock up, given that the pandemic has not receded from the world?"

A Union health ministry comparison of hospital admissions over the last year has shown that this time, there is a 13 per cent increase in oxygen beds. The analysis does not explain why this is so, neither

does it factor in the increased oxygen demand for home patients. The ventilator demand, on the other hand, dropped by 10 per cent. Percentages, however, do not indicate the denominator, which is massive this time, and in sheer numbers, oxygen, ventilators and medicines supplies are being strained.

There are multiple reasons for the increased demand. The UK variant that is dominating the north spreads faster, and thereby, entire localities are falling ill, leading to a strain on local infrastructure, said epidemiologist Archisman Mohapatra, executive director, Generating Research Insights for Development (GRID) Council.

It has not helped that the infrastructure set up last time, instead of being augmented, had actually been dismantled. Bengaluru happily wrapped up the massive field hospital it had set up last year; today, its patients are scouring for beds in Mysuru, Hubli and nearby towns. In Delhi, while the Centre and state may blame each other for the situation, the truth is that neither stopped the other from pulling down jumbo facilities that the Defence and Research Development Organisation and Indo-Tibetan Border Police had put up; they had to be revived all over again. The Sardar Patel Covid Care Centre and Hospital in Chhatrapur admitted its first patient on April 26, much after the daily death toll had crossed the 300 mark. The ITBP facility had 123 admissions on the day of reopening.

But was it just shortage, or more of mismanagement, which caused patients to gasp to their deaths? In Delhi, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal complained of supplies being stopped at the borders, ultimately forcing the Centre to invoke the Disaster Management Act and allow free movement of the life-giving gas. However, within cities, there was initially no coordinated supply mechanism. "Instead of giving a decent reaction time of 12 hours, hospitals sometimes suddenly announce that they will run out of supply within a matter of hours," said Sachindra Pratap Singh of Mumbai's oxygen supply task force. Such panic cries from ministers and hospitals have resulted in a thriving black market for not just oxygen cylinders, but also vital medicines like remdesivir. According to industry sources, the existing oxygen production capacity in India, including in steel plants, is around 8,000MT a day. The Covid-19 surge has put the daily demand at around 6,500MT. It is the distribution, rather than production, which is the bigger problem, said Siddharth Jain, director of INOX Air. Most production is in east India, with some in Karnataka and west India, said Hanuman Mal Bengani, former CEO, Linde India. The demand, on the other hand, is in north India—Delhi, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh—as well as Maharashtra and Gujarat. At the beginning of the second surge, authorities were caught napping when the oxygen demand escalated. The Railways launched its Oxygen Express service on April 21, way after the wave had already caused enough devastation.

The blame game continues. According to the home ministry, Delhi government's management was poor. Union home secretary Ajay Bhalla wrote to the Delhi chief secretary pointing out that the city did not arrange oxygen tankers in time, even though the Centre had made allotments. He said Delhi was allocated 480MT on April 21, after assessing the requirement, but it received less than

AID INCOMING

Support promised to India

UK

495 oxygen concentrators

120 non-invasive ventilators

20 manual ventilators

FRANCE

8 large oxygen generating plants that can be installed quickly

Liquid oxygen

28 respirators and their consumables

200 electric syringe pushers

5 liquid oxygen containers

IRELAND

700 oxygen concentrators

GERMANY

Mobile oxygen production plant (3-month loan)

120 ventilators

8 crore plus KN95 masks

Webinar on testing and on RNA sequencing of the virus

AUSTRALIA

500 ventilators

10 lakh surgical masks

5 lakh P2 and N95 masks

1 lakh goggles

1 lakh pairs of gloves

20,000 face shields

BHUTAN

40 metric tonnes of liquid oxygen daily, from a plant that is being set up

USA

Oxygen generation and related supplies

Therapeutics, PPE and tests

Vaccine raw materials

Technical expertise

Funding for expansion of vaccine manufacturing capability

OTHERS WHO PROMISED SUPPORT

Kuwait, Russia

PRIVATE SUPPORT

US private entities, including Google, Gilead and Amazon, are providing funding, therapeutics, logistics and other support

SOURCE: MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
RESEARCH REKHA DIXIT





PAINFUL WAIT

People queue up with oxygen cylinders for refilling at Naraina Industrial Area in Delhi

SANJAY AHLAWAT

the allocation because of logistical reasons not addressed by the state. Telangana has learnt from the experiences of Delhi and secured oxygen supplies from Odisha.

In Nashik, it was not a shortage of supply but a leak in the oxygen tank that caused the death of 24 patients on life support. The Centre's core team on Covid management, including NITI Aayog member V.K. Paul and AIIMS chief R.K. Guleria, is now giving tips on how to prevent oxygen wastage, and for prudent use of this precious resource.

Meanwhile, even as India looked outside for air, the Sterlite plant at Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, a facility capable of producing 1,050MT oxygen daily, remained shut. Its owners appealed for the gates to be unlocked, but the state government did not agree for a precious long time. In court, advocate general Vijay Narayan said the plant could only produce 35MT of the required liquid oxygen. The plant finally has been given conditional permission to run for four months to produce oxygen.

The situation with the drug and vaccine shortage is even more embarrassing, given the positioning India did last year as the 'pharmacy and vaccinator of the world'. Today, it is receiving drugs in aid. The Vaccine Maitri outreach has come to an embarrassing halt, with neither exports materialising, nor the supplies being adequate for the forthcoming programme of universal adult vaccination from May. The long lines are back—for oxygen cylinders, medicines and beds. "We are back to the India of the 1970s," said Chakrabarty. "India lost much of its high ground with the migrant crisis last year. The oxygen crisis this year has dented our international image badly. We thought we had a seat at the high table and were part of the global decision-making process, here we have been exposed at not being able to handle our own mess."

The coming days are likely to be worse, with the Empowered Group of Officers (EG-1) under Paul warning the Centre to prepare for a five to six lakh daily rise of cases by May before the curve dips. With the aid coming in, supplies may be secured for the present. But if there is any lesson that the second wave has taught, it is that the endgame is far away. "Typically, pandemics come in several surges, spread over a couple of years, before settling down as endemics," said Mohapatra. A third wave is a distinct possibility, even a fourth. Will we be caught napping again?

With Namrata Biji Ahuja, Lakshmi Subramanian, Pooja Biraia Jaiswal, Abhinav Singh and Rahul Devulapalli



RINKURAJ MATTANCHERYIL

Valuing each vial

The Kerala strategy for zero wastage of Covid-19 vaccine

BY CITHARA PAUL

SANDHYA S., AN ASHA worker from the Kozhikode district in Kerala, had a tough task at hand for the last three months. Every morning, she had to bring 10 senior citizens to the Covid-19 vaccination centre in her area and had to coordinate with a junior public health nurse to get them vaccinated.

"There were many apprehensions about the vaccines," recalled Sandhya. "We had to convince the people about the benefits of taking vaccines and then coax them to come to the vaccination centre. It was quite the task. But now I am happy that everybody above 60 in my neighbourhood is vaccinated."

Divya Santhosh, a nurse at a primary health centre in Kasaragod district, said the challenging task for her was to eliminate vaccine wastage. "Once a vaccine vial is punctured, it has to be used within six hours," she said. "So, it was important that we had enough beneficiaries present before opening a vial. We ensured this by coordinating with ASHA workers and JPHNs." According to her, the team would sit together every day and finalise the list of beneficiaries for the next day to ensure that not a single vial was wasted.

Thousands of ASHAs and nurses like Sandhya and Divya were the ones who powered Kerala's efficient Covid-19 vaccination drive. While over 44 lakh doses were wasted countrywide until April 11, five states—Kerala, Mizoram, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh and Goa—reported "zero wastage".

GOOD RESPONSE

The mega vaccination drive at Jimmy George Indoor Stadium, Thiruvananthapuram

"Our health workers are well adept in handling the vaccination drive," said Dr Mohammed Asheel, who heads the state social security mission. "The value of every drop of vaccine is very high and we had conveyed this to our vaccinators."

Up to 10 people can be vaccinated from a 10ml vial. "Most vials contain some extra vaccine. Most of our nurses could use even this extra amount for vaccination [with efficient planning]," said Dr Asheel. He added that the strong cold chain mechanism that the state has also helped in better storage of vaccines.

But there were many hiccups in between because of the local self-government elections and assembly elections. "When the new local self-governments came into existence, there was a lull in the Covid fight," said Dr Joy Elamon, director general, Kerala Institute of Local Administration. "So, our primary focus after the LSG elections was to create awareness among the new local body representatives about our vaccination drive, and it worked." According to him, the modernisation that public health institutions have undergone in terms of infrastructure and manpower in the past few years has also played a crucial role.

"The state's public health system is very robust; so is private care," said Dr B. Ekbal, chairman, Kerala state expert committee on Covid-19 management. "A collaborative effort of both will be crucial in the coming days as Covid-19 cases are going to surge." ●

Derailed drive

Vaccine hesitancy and a lenient administration led to a high percentage of vaccine wastage in Tamil Nadu

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

MANIKANDAN NARAYANAN, 62, took his first dose of Covaxin on March 18, at a private hospital in Kodambakkam, Chennai. After 28 days, he went for the second dose, but the hospital told him that the vaccine is “not available.” In the subsequent days, he tried again, but the response remained the same.

Finally, acting on a friend’s advice, he went to a government vaccination centre on April 26 and got his second dose, after waiting in a long queue. “I was told that Covaxin is in short supply,” he said. So, when newspapers reported the vaccine wastage in Tamil Nadu, Narayanan was shocked.

As per the Union government’s response to an RTI query, around 44 lakh doses of vaccine have been wasted in India till April 11. Tamil Nadu (12 per cent) wasted the most, followed by Haryana (9.74 per cent), Punjab (8.12 per cent), Manipur (7.8 per cent) and Telangana (7.55 per cent).

According to the directorate of public health and preventive medicine (DPH), Tamil Nadu, the state wasted 4.5 lakh doses between January 16 and April 20. The wastage stood at around 10 per cent between January and March, as the vaccination drive was open only for frontline workers.

Said Tamil Nadu Chief Secretary Rajeev Ranjan: “In the initial days



AFP

SYSTEM FAILURE

Tamil Nadu wasted 4.5 lakh vaccine doses between January 16 and April 20

The [vaccine] wastage came down to 8 per cent as we started vaccinating people above 45 years since mid-March.

—Dr T.S. Selvavinayagam, director of public health, Tamil Nadu

of the vaccination drive, only five to six persons would show up at the vaccination centres, [and that too,] late in the evening. The vaccines were administered to them, only to ensure that they are not disappointed. Many opened vials had got wasted [in this manner].”

J. Radhakrishnan, health secretary, Tamil Nadu, said that once a vaccine vial is opened, it has to be used within a few hours, and should be stored 2 degrees and 8 degrees Celsius. “These [conditions] resulted in the wastage,” he said. “But now, as people turn up in large numbers, we can ensure zero wastage in the coming days.”

He recalled that hesitancy was very high during the initial phase of the vaccination drive. After Kollywood actor Vivek’s untimely demise on April 17—two days after he took a shot—rumours were spread that the vaccine caused his death. “[But the government now ensures that] such rumours are stopped at the initial stages itself,” said Radhakrishnan.

As the vaccination drive turned active, the vaccine wastage has been brought down. “The wastage came down to 8 per cent as we started vaccinating people above 45 years since mid-March,” said Director of Public Health Dr T.S. Selvavinayagam. The wastage is expected to go down further after May 1, when everyone above 18 becomes eligible for vaccination. ●



COLOURS OF FREEDOM

Israelis are no longer required to wear masks while outdoors

AFP

Teens can wait

Though Israel has been vaccinating its older teenagers, India might have to hold off on doing the same

BY MINI P. THOMAS

ISRAEL IS ONE OF the few countries where you can walk around without a mask. With the economy opening up and children returning to schools, the country is inching towards some semblance of normality. "It is good to see cultural and sports activities taking place again," said Jonathan Zadka, consul general of Israel to south India.

Israel's preparedness and quick response paid off. "These included making tough choices early on," said Zadka. "[Like] closing borders and schools, shuttering businesses and limiting all non-essential activities, while sustaining a burst of innovation, from startups and drive-through testing centres to telemedicine and vaccine research."

As many as 5 million Israelis have received both doses of the vaccine. More than 90 per cent of those above 60 have been fully vaccinated.

Having a small population of 90 lakh worked in Israel's favour. Reopening schools and vaccinating the young, including older teens, was top priority; the government did not want the young to be denied any opportunity for growth—emotionally, socially

and cognitively—after such a long period of uncertainty. "It also helped minimise the risk for the more vulnerable groups of society," said Zadka.

Countries like India have a lot to learn from Israel's robust vaccination programme. However, health experts said it might not be feasible for India to vaccinate its 16- to 18-year-olds right now. "That is not the right idea," said Dr T. Jacob John, retired professor and head, departments of clinical virology and microbiology, Christian Medical College, Vellore. "If it is one child or two here and there, there is no harm doing it. But I am talking about a policy."

The purpose of vaccination is two-fold, said the former director of ICMR's Centre of Advanced Research in Virology. "First and foremost, vaccination is meant to save lives and prevent severe Covid-19," he said. "Severe disease usually occurs in senior citizens and people with comorbidities. They should be given priority. The second purpose of public health vaccination is to reduce the burden of disease, for which burden of infection has to be brought down. Taking these into account, I think older adults should be prioritised for vaccination."

The pandemic has posed major challenges to India's education system. Remote learning has proven to be a less efficient substitute and students have come up with ingenious ways to outsmart invigilators during exams. Are these reasons valid enough for the government to consider vaccinating those between 16 and 18? Said John, "It does not make sense to me, especially because the supply of vaccines is limited. Instead, all staff in educational institutions must be vaccinated. Then you can open schools and colleges, and exams can be conducted offline."

But how do we ensure students do not get infected from each other? "They might get infected," he said, "but it would not be serious for most children." ●



BAD TIMES

Many realty projects have been paused because of the slow market and shortage of labourers

A midsummer nightmare: Act two

An irrational exuberance cloaked a flagging economy; a devastating second wave has exposed it

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

AT AN EARLY-APRIL briefing addressing the surge in coronavirus infections in India, Reserve Bank governor Shaktikanta Das took refuge in an unlikely source of economic wisdom. Rather than quoting the likes of Adam Smith or John Maynard Keynes, he chose American civil

rights activist Martin Luther King Jr: "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope."

As the second wave of Covid-19 brought India's health care system to its knees, the worry increasingly is on how much pain the next target in line, the economy, can bear. Hope may be infinite, but stark reality is harshly finite for thousands of small

and medium businesses already bleeding from the first round of spikes last year.

In fact, indications are emerging that the economy had already slowed down before the second wave hit with brute force, despite all the pep talk of V-shaped trajectories, festive booms and 'better than pre-Covid level' growth claims. "Those were just green shoots of recovery. The real economy has not grown at this point of time," said Sethurathnam Ravi, economist and former chairman of Bombay Stock Exchange. "If you look at the last two and a half years, we

were not doing well, our growth rate was low [before] we got into a negative growth [after last year's lockdown]. Manufacturing output hasn't come anywhere near its earlier peak. We are not anywhere in a growing zone."

He said the government and India Inc papered over the cracks, and celebrated too soon. "All of it was on the mistaken over-optimism that we had overcome the virus, the vaccine had come and it was believed that the vaccine would take care of everything," he said.

The writing was on the wall all the while. In the rush of the irrational exuberance following the pick-up in sales during the festive season, however, it was conveniently ignored. R.C. Bhargava, chairman of Maruti Suzuki, had warned way back in October that the increase in sales was primarily due to pent-up demand. But Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman kept repeating that recovery would sustain, and that it was not just due to pent-up demand.

Once the festive season high got over, however, the worry lines started to show. "After a strong bounce-back, some of the economic indicators started showing signs of weakness," said Rajani Sinha, chief economist & national director (research), Knight Frank India. "The core sector contracted by a sharp 4.6 per cent, while the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) contracted by 3.6 per cent in February. The Purchasing Manufacturer's Index (PMI) of both manufacturing and services sector has inched down in March 2021."

With 'recovery' ending up a flash-in-the-pan, the bigger worry is the overall picture the economy presents. One factor that makes this clear is the lack of increase in bank credit, which means fewer businesses are taking loans for capital expenditure. This had already declined to 5.7 per cent before the pandemic, and it dipped further to 5 per cent even after unlock. Worse, services and manufacturing sector credit is negative.

"How do you define growth? New capital expenditure and fresh demand. Both have not come," said Ravi.

In retail, consumption has dropped once the pent-up demand exhausted. That is why Prachir Singh, senior analyst with Counterpoint, a consultancy which tracks mobile phone sales, is not happy despite the stellar sales in the past few months. "The consumer demand will take a hit," he said.

Take the footwear industry, for instance. The festive rush and pent-up demand had raised hopes of getting back to its pre-pandemic size of ₹70,000 crore. "We were expecting a greater rate of growth



We were expecting a greater rate of growth in financial year 2022. However, all these expectations have now been put on hold.

—Harkirat Singh,
managing director, Aero Club

in financial year 2022. However, all these expectations have now been put on hold," said Harkirat Singh, managing director of Aero Club, which makes Woodland shoes.

The scenario is more or less the same across industries. And, this time around, more than any draconian lockdown or government rules, it is the pandemic itself that is the villain. Many companies have shut down production due to high rates of infection among employees. Hero, the world's biggest two-wheeler manufacturer, announced that it would temporarily halt operations at all its manufacturing facilities. Almost all electronics and white goods manufacturers have drastically cut down capacity.

"Rising absenteeism is likely to hit production," - said a Gurgaon-based auto component supplier in a



The lower-income category and unorganised sector will see a lot of job and income losses from the second wave.

—**Rajani Sinha**,
chief economist & national director (research),
Knight Frank India

statement. “As cases continue to rise, output may be hurt more severely. Major vehicle and parts makers are managing the situation better. However, it is very tough for tier II suppliers and below.”

The second round of ‘whiplashing’ could be lethal for many businesses that have yet to recover from the woes of the first. While it holds particularly true for small and medium businesses, some sectors like aviation, hotels, retail (malls and branded stores), restaurants and entertainment will struggle to stay afloat if the situation continues for long, lockdown or not. “March was low, but we had lots of hope on weddings booked in April, May and June. Now April has been washed out and May will definitely be poor,” said Ajay Bakaya, managing director of Sarovar Hotels.

Sectors like automobile, real estate and construction could also get severely impacted if the severity of caseloads does not come down in the days to come and further restrictions or lockdowns are announced. Together, these sectors contribute a significant chunk of India’s gross domestic product.

This is where Das’s ‘infinite hope’ comes into play. “All eyes are on how best we can navigate through the next few turbulent weeks,” said Elias George,



Though the ongoing second wave is far more widespread, the overall economic impact is expected to be less pronounced.

—**Arvind Nandan**,
managing director (research & consulting),
Savills India

partner and head (infrastructure, government and health care), KPMG in India. “With the extension and the broad basing of the vaccination effort, it is hoped that the overall health security for the population will improve, and the economy will get back on an even keel over the medium term.”

While more lockdowns cannot still be ruled out, the general feeling is that with exemptions given for business activity, they may not have the debilitating impact like the last time. “There have been some learnings for businesses, government and households from the first wave of Covid, which should help to handle the situation better in the second wave,” said Sinha of Knight Frank. According to Arvind Nandan, managing director (research & consulting), Savills India, “Though the ongoing second wave is far more widespread, the overall economic impact is expected to be less pronounced.”

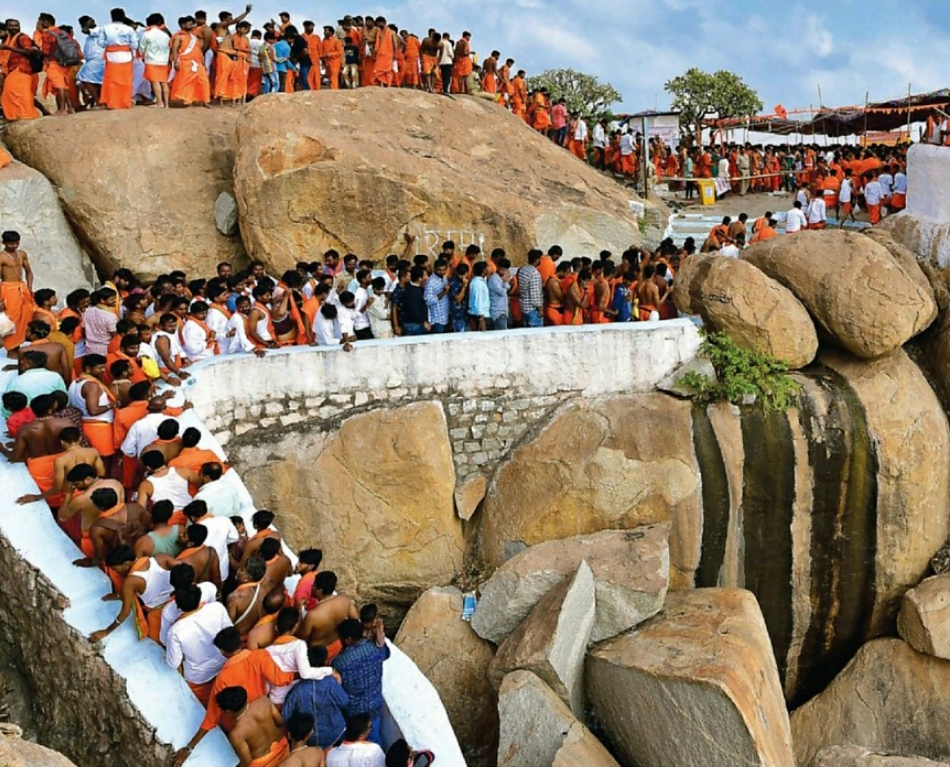
The bigger fear is the rapid rate of spread. “It is a health crisis and there is a lot of uncertainty on how much time it will take to control the crisis,” said Sinha. “The pace of vaccination will have a strong bearing on the eventual move of the economy towards normalisation.”

But that will not be before the second wave leaves a trail of devastation. “The lower-income category and unorganised sector will see a lot of job and income losses from the second wave,” Sinha said. Added Harkirat Singh, “Extended help will be required from the government.” ●

Origin story

Claims that Hanuman was born in Tirupati cause a stir in Karnataka, which has for years held that he was born near Hampi

BY PRATHIMA NANDAKUMAR AND RAHUL DEVULAPALLI





SATISH B MURALI

Anjanadri Betta—a hill on the left bank of the Tungabhadra River in Karnataka's Koppal district—has been revered for years as the birthplace of Lord Hanuman. But, every now and again, there are other claimants to the birthplace—Anjaneri in Nashik, Maharashtra; Anjan hill in Navsari, Gujarat; Anjan village in Jharkhand; and Gokarna in Karnataka. The latest claim comes from the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) in Andhra Pradesh, the custodians of the richest Hindu temple.

On Ram Navami (April 21), the TTD produced what it called “irrefutable evidence” to prove that Japali Theertham, a holy site on Anjanadri hill in Tirumala, was Hanuman's actual birthplace. It is believed that a sage, Japali, had done penance there, and Hanuman had appeared before him. A section of devotees believes that it was the exact spot where Hanuman was born, which is why Japali chose it.

Last December, the TTD had set up an eight-member panel of Vedic scholars, historians and Indian Space Research Organisation scientists to study “mythological, epigraphic and geographical” evidence.

Karnataka, which prides itself as the land of Hanuman, was ranked by the trust's “arbitrary” research; some scholars have alleged that the research was driven by commercial interests.

“Our evidence is not based on some mythological versions,” said V. Muralidhara Sharma, panel member and vice chancellor of the National Sanskrit University. “We have worked day and night to back the popular belief with proof available in religious literature and inscriptions.”

LAND OF HANUMAN
Anjanadri Betta in Karnataka

According to the panel, Hanuman was born in the Treta Yuga to Anjana Devi. She had been asked to perform penance on Venkatachalam hill to be blessed with a son. After Hanuman was born, Venkatachalam became known as Anjanadri. Pointing to texts such as Skanda Purana, Varaha Purana and Brahmanda Purana, Sharma said that after baby Hanuman was punished by the gods for leaping into the sky and trying to eat the sun, Lord Brahma had consoled the heartbroken mother by naming the region after her.

The panel also claimed that, in some religious texts, the exact location of Anjanadri is described by landmarks. "The inscriptions found in temples in Kanchi and at other places also talk about Anjanadri," said Sharma.

The panel said the other claims were "baseless". "We did not find anything concrete to suggest Lord Hanuman was born in Chhattisgarh, Haryana or other places," said Sharma. "They are just local beliefs."

The panel has released a 20-page booklet, and will soon submit a 200-page book to the TTD.

Scholars and historians in Karnataka, meanwhile, have cited the Valmiki Ramayan, along with ancient inscriptions and manuscripts, to reinforce their claim that Anjanadri Betta in Aneundi town, near Hampi, is the real birthplace of Hanuman.

According to local historians, Aneundi was the citadel of the Vijayanagara Empire before Hampi was chosen as the capital. Hampi is believed to be the place where Lord Ram, who came in search of Sita, met Hanuman for the first time.

"We will soon petition the Centre, demanding that Anjanadri Betta be officially declared as the Hanuman janmasthan (birthplace)," said Amresh, son of Koppal MP Sanganna Karadi.

Said Dr Sharanabasappa Kolkar, a historian in Koppal: "The TTD panel

admits that Hampi is Kishkinda, but claims that Venkatachalam is Anjanadri. This is not only childish, but also illogical. Vali, Sugreeva and Hanuman were the warrior kings from the Vanara kingdom, which is in Kishkinda. The TTD draws its evidence from Sthala Puranas like Venkatachala Mahatmya, which are recent works. For us, Valmiki Ramayan has the most ancient and authentic geographical references and the description of the terrain and landscape of Kishkinda... Now, how can Hanuman, who was the minister of King Sugreeva, be born in Tirupati? Moreover, Tirumala-Tirupati is known as Venkatadri hills (Venkatachala Betta). As the TTD claims, if Tirupati hills is known by 19 names and Anjanadri is just one of them, why did they restrict their research and discussion to Anjanadri alone?"

Dr Ram Avtar Sharma, head of the National Committee on Ramayana Circuit, told THE WEEK that the references in the Valmiki Ramayan strongly indicated that Hampi was Hanuman's birthplace. "The epic... twice [mentions] that Hanuman was born in a cave and that a young Hanuman fell on Udayagiri Parvat (hill) when an angry Indra struck him," said Ram Avtar. "Hanuman's father, Kesari, lived on Malyavant Parvat and his kingdom was on Sumeru

Scholars and historians in Karnataka have cited the Valmiki Ramayan to reinforce their claim that Anjanadri Betta is the real birthplace of Hanuman.



Parvat; none of these places exist in Tirupati. [There is no mention of] Hanuman having visited any other region [apart from Hampi]."

Ram Avtar is working on developing all the places associated with Ram and the Ramayan. Incidentally, Tirupati is not one of the 15 places on the national panel's list.

Historians also cite American indologist Philip Lutgendorf's book *Hanuman's Tale*, which refers to Hanuman's birthplace as Anjanadri, near Hampi.

On the foothills of Anjanadri Betta are villages named Anjanahalli and Hanumahalli; many girls in the area are named 'Anjana Devi', including a former panchayat president of Aneundi.

It is not just the Hindus who revere Hanuman. In the Jain Ramayan, the Vanaras were not monkeys, but war-



MATTER OF FAITH

On April 21, the TTD produced "irrefutable evidence" to prove that Japali Theertham was Hanuman's actual birthplace

and also consecrated as many as 732 Hanuman temples across his empire."

The current controversy has annoyed the Anegundi royal family, too. Krishnadevaraya, who is a direct descendant of Aliya Rama Raya, son-in-law of King Krishnadevaraya, said he had more faith in the "saints" and their testimonies of Anjanadri than the findings of the TTD panel. "While there are innumerable

riors who fought under a flag bearing the monkey symbol. The cave drawings in Anegundi and nearby hills depict Hanuman without a tail.

Historians say King Krishnadevaraya (1509-1529), the most illustrious king of the Vijayanagara Empire, was aware of the site's significance as the birthplace of Hanuman. "He built many Ram temples, including Kodandarama, Hazara Rama, Pattabhirama and Malavanta Raghunatha, to acknowledge that Ram, Lakshman and Hanuman walked on this land," said Kolkar. "Sequences from the Ramayan were depicted on the walls of Hazara Rama temple... Dvaita philosopher Vyasa Raja Teertha, the rajaguru (royal priest) of King Krishnadevaraya, was aware that Anjanadri was the birthplace of Hanuman. The king built the Hanuman temple atop Anjanadri hill

edicts and inscriptions identifying Anjanadri in Anegundi as the birthplace of Lord Hanuman, I will still go by what the great pontiffs have said about the place," he said. "During my childhood, the Kanchi seer had come to our house and said he had felt the strong presence of Lord Hanuman in Anegundi."

Said Dr Vasudev Badiger, professor of ancient history and archaeological studies in Kannada University, Hampi: "Oral tradition has helped pass on the historical significance of ancient places through generations, which is then documented in the form of manuscripts and inscriptions. The Pampa Mahatme, the legendary history of the region as narrated in the religious text Skanda Purana, mentions several names of places like Malyavantagiri, Rishya Mukha, Kishkindadri, Hemakoota,

Viprakoota and Gandharvagiri, which continue to be known by the same name even now. The Kartikeya Vana mentioned in the Ramayan is some 40km from Hampi, and it was here that Rama procured powerful weapons to fight Vali."

Anegundi had been a sleepy town for years. Then, last year, the Ram temple issue in Ayodhya was resolved, and the town in Karnataka saw renewed interest. The town, which had found mention in election speeches of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, has seen a sudden rush of religious activity. Recently, Karnataka Governor Vajubhai Vala collected two stone slabs from Anjanadri hill to be used to rebuild a Hanuman temple in his village in Anand district, Gujarat.

The Karnataka government has big plans to develop Anjanadri Betta, on the lines of the upcoming Ram temple in Ayodhya. A planned meeting to discuss the master plan, which included MLAs and ministers, was deferred because of the rising Covid-19 numbers.

The many suggestions included a giant statue, a ropeway to help the elderly scale the hill, and commercial activities to make Anjanadri a global tourist destination. The Anjanadri temple, which the Muzrai department had taken over two years ago, currently generates an annual revenue of ₹15 lakh. "I am keen to be part of restoring the ancient temples of Anegundi, which are in ruins," said Krishnadevaraya. "It is a living heritage and we must restore it structurally, without affecting its aesthetic, and revive the rituals. The masterplan needs to be carefully drafted as the region is known for its pristine environs. We need to retain the natural exuberance of the place and we need to develop it as a pilgrimage centre and not as a commercial tourist centre with unwanted concrete structures."●



ROAD TO SAFETY

The UP government wants the Bundelkhand expressway to be the country's safest highway

BY PUJA AWASTHI

Two deaths an hour. That is the rate of road accidents in Uttar Pradesh, the largest contributor to nationwide fatalities. UP has also been the first state to adopt a road safety policy.

The preamble to the policy, adopted in 2014, says, "The government of Uttar Pradesh is highly concerned about the steep rise in the number of road accidents, injuries and fatalities in recent years. It is the ground reality that road accidents have now become a public health issue, and the victims are mainly from poor sections of society."

In recent years, UP has seen a massive push to build highways and expressways, which include the Purvanchal expressway, the Gorakhpur link expressway and the Bundelkhand expressway.

The state government wants the Bundelkhand expressway to be the country's safest highway—with road safety engineering leading to a reduced number of accidents, and fatalities reduced with ready access to medical facilities.

With technological inputs from Intercontinental Consultants and Technocrats private limited (ICT), the Uttar Pradesh Expressways Industrial Development Authority (UPEIDA), headed by additional chief secretary Awanish Awasthi, is putting in place measures that will kick in as the expressway opens for use in early 2022.

Said Kiran Kumar Kapila, managing director of ICT, "We can build an expressway, which will be quoted for years to come as a case study of the safest such structure anywhere in the world."

These are many aspects that go into building an expressway. One of them is safe infrastructure engineering, which means not only making the safest structure under existing norms but also making a structure that is forgiving towards human mistakes. Vehicle engineering, like conspicuous reflective tapes on all commercial vehicles, is important. Vehicles that do not have tapes, which are inbuilt into many newer models, should be strictly barred from entering expressways.

Another critical aspect is education to ensure that road users employ maximum caution, for which

In recent years, Uttar Pradesh has seen a massive push to build highways and expressways.



a controlled-access expressway is required. Educating people on the Good Samaritan law helps as that will make people rescue victims of an accident rather than make videos or stay silent spectators.

The need of the hour is to include lessons on road safety into the school curriculum. The ICT has prepared them for NCERT books from classes six to ten, and has suggested that the UP government incorporate it in the state board curriculum. Awareness building is also to be done through road safety messages and songs played on television, radio and social media, and at public places.

Education for service providers is also critical. For this, police stations, within a buffer zone, have to be mapped, and the personnel trained in traffic management, the Good Samaritan law and accident collection data, which includes determination of speed of vehicles through radar. The collection of road accident data on standardised forms ensures comprehensiveness.

Another critical parameter is en-



**WORK IN
PROGRESS**
Bundelkhand
expressway

enforcement of speed limits and other stipulations, a uniform advanced traffic management system and a tolling system to cover the entire highway.

Last, it is important to have an emergency care system, which includes mapping of health facilities, training of able-bodied young adults (bystanders) in providing first aid and training of paramedics in first aid trauma care. A survey of medical facilities is to be done in a pre-set format.

In 2019, India reported 1,51,113 deaths due to road accidents. This translates into 417 deaths a day or 17 deaths in an hour—equivalent to one jumbo jet crash with no survivors. Yet, as Kapila said, "Airline crashes are followed by searches and investigations. That does not happen with

road accidents as most of those who suffer are poor."

Said Ahustosh Soti of the Lucknow-based Shubham Soti Foundation that works to create road safety awareness, "If there is an issue which concerns every person, it is road safety. Interventions that put a stop to this hazard thus cannot be standalone but have to be built into our everyday lives."

Since 2010, Soti's foundation has adopted numerous innovative ways to educate people, like having volunteers dressed as zebras to emphasise the need to respect rights of pedestrians.

In 2015, UP recorded 32,385 accidents and this number went up to 42,572 in 2019. Accidents per lakh population have grown from 16.3 in 2016 to 18.7 in 2019. Two-wheeler

BUNDELKHAND EXPRESSWAY

Will connect some of the least developed districts of the state (Chitrakoot, Banda, Mahoba, Hamirpur, Jalaun, Auraiya and Etawah) to Delhi through the existing Agra-Lucknow expressway.

LENGTH

296.07
kilometres

PROGRESS

till March 30

50.43%

- Nature: Four lanes expandable to six lanes
- It is a total access controlled expressway
- Number of rivers falling on alignment: Eight (Bagen, Ken, Shyama, Chandawal, Birma, Yamuna, Betwa, and Sengar).
- Proposed structures: Four railway overbridges, 14 large bridges, 6 toll plazas, 7 ramp plaza, 266 small bridges and 18 flyovers

Source: Uttar Pradesh Expressways Industrial Development Authority

deaths in UP are also high with 7,405 such deaths recorded in 2019. These account for 12.7 per cent of all such deaths recorded in the country.

The Bundelkhand expressway, hopefully, could show the way to bring down these numbers. ●

Dear readers, have you ever been in a road accident?
Do you have a story or experience to share with us?
What are your suggestions for road safety?
You can mail us at drivetolive.theweek@gmail.com





International
Press
Institute

47

JOURNALISTS KILLED
IN THE LAST YEAR

620

PRESS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS LINKED
TO COVID-19 SINCE FEB. 2020

“

A critical, independent
and investigative press
is the lifeblood of any
democracy. The press
must be free from state
interference.

Nelson Mandela

IPI 1994 World Congress in South Africa



WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY 2021

SEEN AND UNSEEN

In his new memoir,
Kabir Bedi
reveals how his
successes and
setbacks remade
him as a person

BY NAVIN J. ANTONY

CITIZEN OF THE WORLD

Kabir Bedi in Morocco
while filming for Italian
film *Mashamal—ritorno
al deserto* in 1995



Kabir Bedi's decision to become an actor was a hard one. He had initially wanted to be an architect, but was told that working for a living while studying architecture was impossible. So, he studied history at St Stephen's College, and pictured himself in various roles—as a civil servant (unexciting, he decided); a writer-journalist (maybe, but the pay was bad); a tourist guide (profitable, but it did not feel quite right); a documentary filmmaker (too limiting); a film producer (too ambitious); and so on.

Of course, he could have entered politics. His schoolmates, Rajiv and Sanjay, had moved on from racing toy trains to racing Ambassadors around Delhi's traffic circles. When Bedi was considering his options, their mother, Indira Gandhi, had become India's prime minister.

"Politics? Why not? I knew the Gandhis," writes Bedi in the new memoir *Stories I Must Tell: The Emotional Life of an Actor*. "But I had no money. If I went into politics to make money, what was the point of it? I couldn't imagine being corrupt. It went against everything my parents had instilled in me. No, politics was not an option."

Perhaps it was because of another friend and would-be politician, Kapil Sibal, that Bedi did not even consider a career in acting. "At St Stephen's, my production of Julius Caesar had Kapil as Caesar while I played the lowly Casca," writes Bedi. "Kooler Talk," the irreverent student rag, said Caesar had been murdered twice. Once by Brutus, once by Kapil."

So, in 1967, Bedi moved to Mumbai after deciding that he would become a director. The rest is well-known history: Bedi became



AFP

**"I HAVE WRITTEN
THE BOOK THROUGH
THE PRISM OF
PEOPLE AND PLACES
THAT I HAVE KNOWN,
MY TRIUMPHS AND
TRAGEDIES, MY
MILESTONES AND
MY MISTAKES."**



the most famous Indian face abroad, working in North America, Europe and Asia, and in film, television and theatre. Playing the eponymous pirate in the Italian TV series *Sando-kani* made him a European sensation, while his villainous role in the James Bond film *Octopussy* won him friends in Hollywood. As a star, he may not have shimmered as bright in India as he did abroad, but still became part of cult classics like *Khoon Bhari Mang*.

"I think my greatest satisfactions have come as an actor," Bedi, now



RICHER FOR THE EXPERIENCE

(Clockwise from bottom left) Bedi with wife Parveen Dusanj; with actor Parveen Babi in Rome in 1976; a still from Italian mini-series *The Return of Sandokan*; with the cast of *Octopussy*

75, tells *THE WEEK*. "The greatest of them were the successes I had in Italy, which made me a household word across the whole of Europe, or being in the James Bond film which gave me a worldwide fanbase, or being in *The Bold and the Beautiful*, which was seen by 400 million people a day."

Off screen, too, Bedi had an eventful life—perhaps, only too eventful. Soured relationships and personal tragedies often overshadowed his professional successes. In *Stories I Must Tell*, Bedi has parted curtains to offer a view of his inner life, in terms of both experiences and emotions. "I have written the book through the prism of people and places that I have known, my triumphs and tragedies, my milestones and my mistakes," he says. "It's really the emotional roller coaster of my life across three continents."

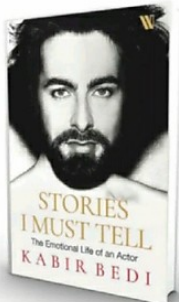
Bedi himself is the product of two continents and cultures. As the son of a Punjabi philosopher-psycho who battled racism in England and a "peaches-and-cream English beauty"

who became the first woman from the west to take full ordination in Tibetan Buddhism, Bedi's extraordinary upbringing set him off on a trajectory that ensured that there would be no dearth of dramatic stories to tell.

Stories I Must Tell stands as a testament to his powers as a raconteur. "East meets West love stories have predictable crises," Bedi writes, as he narrates a serious argument his parents had as they once picnicked on the lawns of Oxford. His father wanted his mother to peel some oranges for him, but she refused as she did not want to be perceived as servile. "Those oranges almost ended their loving relationship," Bedi writes. "Luckily for us, their children, they compromised. She agreed to peel the oranges, as long as he didn't eat them until she had finished. They ate them together and stayed together for decades."

Parts of *Stories I Must Tell* read like magical fairy tales—Bedi's encounter with the Beatles, his years in advertising, meeting the who's who of European and American cinema, and so on. The stories of Bedi's trail-blazing escapades as an actor alone make the book a must read.

What make it fascinating are the insights Bedi offers into himself and the people around him. He writes candidly, and often searchingly and poignantly, about his tumultuous relationships, the loss of his son,



Stories I Must Tell: The Emotional Life of an Actor

By Kabir Bedi

Published by Westland
Pages 311; price ₹699

and the painful ups and downs that remade him as a person.

Writing the book, Bedi says, was cathartic. "I had to relive many of those deeply emotional scenes in relationships, the joys of my triumphs, the deepest sorrows of my son's schizophrenia," he says. "I had to actually remember those moments, relive them and write them down. And at times, I would break down in tears. It was cathartic and it was revelatory, in the sense that I was able to look back on my life with the wisdom of today and see myself for the person that I was at that time." ●

CROWNING GLORY

A new book takes an empathetic look at the legacy of a mother and son from one of India's preeminent royal families

BY SNEHA BHURA

Mahadev Desai, Mahatma Gandhi's close associate and confidante, once wrote a book called *The Epic of Travancore*. The kingdom of Travancore in southern India—which was a princely state during the British rule that later became part of the state of Kerala—is known to have promulgated several progressive reforms under the last Maharaja of Travancore, Sree Padmanabha Dasa Sree Chithira Thirunal Rama Varma (1912–1991), more popularly known as Sree Chithira Thirunal. One of the most notable ones was the temple entry proclamation, passed on November 12, 1936. The law facilitated the entry of all Hindus, irrespective of caste, to over 1,500 temples managed by the Travancore state. Sree Chithira Thirunal, hence, became the first Indian ruler to discard untouchability in religious affairs.

Desai wrote in his book, "...the unique character of this Charter has made the Maharajah's name universally acclaimed as ranking with King Asoka and King Akbar." Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, the last maharaja's niece, pens a resplendent account of her royal lineage in *History Liberated: The Sree Chithira Saga*. The book covers the legacy of her uncle and grandmother, Maharani Setu Parvathi Bayi, Sree Chithira Thirunal's mother and the junior maharani of Travancore. It gives the reader a sweeping view of the historical canvas of Thruppap-

poor Swaroopam, the formal name of the Royal House of Travancore.

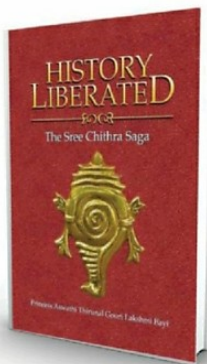
The author has deftly referenced crucial milestones in the history of the kingdom through the stories of the royal cousins, Maharani Setu Lakshmi Bayi (who later became the queen regent) and Setu Parvathi Bayi. While the book is centred on

the life and legend of Sree Chithira Thirunal, it does so while orbiting the lives of the adopted maharanis, products of the matrilineal system followed by the royal family.

But, perhaps, the most important character in the book is Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple, the omniscient eye powering the narrative forward. Be it the royal birthdays, weddings, investiture, the Malayalam New Year, or the swearing-in of the first Maharaja of Travancore, the Ottakkal Mandapam, the sacred single-stone platform in the temple, has been witness to many a momentous occasion.

Several reports had opined that Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple was the richest temple in the world, when, in 2015, reports of the discovery of a new treasure valued at over \$1 trillion surfaced. The royal family has always maintained that any and all treasures in the temple belong to the deity. In 2011, the family had lost custodial rights over the temple, following a High Court ruling. Last July, the Supreme Court upheld the family's traditional rights over the temple.

The most piquant passages of *History Liberated* are in the first part, where the author minutely shares the formative years of the maharanis, described by British traveller Henry Bruce as "two of the daintiest little figures imaginable... both of them little beauties". The sepia-tinted family pictures of their *pallikettu* (royal weddings); the junior rani's devotion to classical south Indian music, to make up for the lack of marital bliss; or her presidential address on women's education at the 1928 All India Women's Social Conference in Calcutta—all add up to a charming portrait of a life lived in all its fullness. The family memoir sheds a much empathetic light on one of India's preeminent royal families and its principal actors in its twilight years. ●



History Liberated: The Sree Chithira Saga
By Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi
Published by Konark Publishers
Pages 434; Price ₹2,000

'FOOL' BALL

When the beautiful game made me cry at 4:30am

BY KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

Yes. I was also told that boys should not cry. Well, to hell with that. If the situation warranted it, I will cry like a baby. And what seemed like the death of football as I knew it certainly warranted a tear or two.

In the early hours of April 19 (IST), 12 of the world's biggest football clubs announced that they would form a breakaway European league. The move would guarantee them more revenue and deny a fair opportunity to smaller clubs. Simply put, it was an elitist cash-grab which threatened the soul of the game. I did not sleep all night and fellow football fans woke up to ominous messages from me along the lines of "football is dead".

But luckily it was not to be. Six of the teams were English and they started buckling under the onslaught of criticism in England—from fans and pundits to the authorities, the prime minister and even Prince William. As the English teams withdrew, the league collapsed, just a couple of days after it was announced.

Football had been saved "from greedy Americans", as the English put it (three of the six English clubs had American owners). It was time to rejoice. I literally did a little jump of joy; it was too much for my overweight frame and I hurt my back.

Though now bedridden, I was still full of energy and abuzz with hashtags: #fanpower, #footballnotsoccer, #uniteagainstgreed. Greed! That got me thinking again. Corruption in

FIFA, UEFA and other football bodies. Money men running the game. Rising costs for the fans. "Super" agents. VAR and the new, messed up handball rules. Football was no longer the sport I fell in love with.

That's it! I am done with football, I told myself. Now, I just needed to find something else to fill the void that football would leave. Right on

cue, I remembered a friend saying she enjoyed knitting. And it was decided. I would take up knitting. I could just Google "Learn knitting" and proceed from there.

So, I started typing the words into the search bar with all the speed of a toddler seeing a keyboard for the first time: L, E.... Google, helpful by nature, immediately started offering suggestions. Left handers day (I didn't know that existed), Leonardo DiCaprio (your countrymen tried to kill football, I shouted at the actor) and ...uh oh! About 40 seconds later, I was, like an idiot, watching a replay of Leeds United vs Liverpool from the previous night.

Football may be corrupt, but even a broken version of the beautiful game makes life so much more bearable. **9**

**THE PROPOSED
SUPER LEAGUE
WAS AN
ELITIST CASH-
GRAB THAT
THREATENED
THE SOUL OF
THE GAME.
LUCKILY IT WAS
NOT TO BE.**



ILLUSTRATION DENI LAL



REVISITING ANAN

The builder of Delhi's first and original Red Fort is set to emerge from the shadows

BY SNEHA BHURA

Using a long wooden stick, Hari Singh is tracing a map of "Lal Kot" on a dirt track in Sanjay Van, the rambling city forest in the heart of Delhi. "Here is Qutub Minar, that is the tomb of Adham Khan, and the walls of the fort travel around MB Road in Saket, all the way to the buildings there. Here is part of the wall rising in the middle of the forest," says Singh, who works with the Archaeological Survey of India's Qutub Minar Circle. The untamed forest around us is dotted with ancient ruins and ravines. Standing at the foot of a soaring rampart wall, Singh explains how Lal Kot was the original Red Fort of Delhi, built and expanded by the Rajput Tomars and, later, by Prithviraj Chauhan. "What

we now call South Delhi should have been Old Delhi. But as history would have it, the Red Fort of Shah Jahan became the *purani Dilli* (old Delhi) side," he says.

If the epic Mahabharata is treated as history, then the earliest settlement at Delhi was set up by the Pandava prince Yudhishthir, as the formidable city of Indraprastha. Since then, Delhi has been continually razed and rebuilt by emperors, kings and sultans. When historians talk about the seven cities of Delhi, they are usually referring to a period between 1100 AD and 1947 AD. This includes fortifications from Lal Kot to Lal Qila, and old historical cities like Prithviraj's Rai Pithora and Siri to Tughlaqabad and Shahjahanabad.

The valour of the Chauhan dynasty

is much celebrated in literature and legend. The Chauhans of Ajmer had defeated the Tomar Rajputs in the middle of the 12th century; Prithviraj was later defeated in the Battle of Tarain in 1192 AD, after which the Delhi Sultanate was established. But little is known of the heroic deeds of Tomars, who reigned over parts of present-day Delhi and Haryana between the eighth and 12th centuries. That is now set to be revisited, particularly the legacy of the emperor Anangpal II, popularly known as Anangpal Tomar, who is credited with building Delhi's first Red Fort in the 11th century.

The Tomar kingdom, which is believed to have laid Delhi's foundation as an urban settlement from 736 AD onwards, reached its pinnacle

GPAL II



SOURCE NMA

ARVIND JAIN

BLAST FROM THE PAST

A restored part of the wall of Lal Kot in Delhi; (above) An artist's recreation of a portrait of Anangpal II

with the reign of Anangpal II, who is considered to be the founder of "Dhillika Puri", which eventually became Delhi. It was during his rule in the 11th century that Lal Kot and Anangtal Baoli (both in South Delhi) were constructed.

And now, the National Monument Authority (NMA), under the Ministry of Culture, wants to declare both as "Monuments of National Importance" in a bid to "correct history". A committee called the 'Maharaja Anangpal II Memorial Committee' has been formed to popularise the legacy of the king. A grand statue of Anangpal II and a museum are envisaged.

In a national seminar held in February, archaeologist B.B. Lal, who was recently awarded the Padma Vibhushan, insisted on urgent excavations in Anang Pur, a township not very far from Anangtal, for architectural and sculptural relics.

"Whatever remains ASI has found show Anangpal as a king who built Dhillika Puri with the passion of a visionary," says Tarun Vijay, chairman of NMA. "His Anang Pur dam (a national monument under ASI, near Surajkund in Faridabad, Haryana) is a marvel of irrigation technology from a thousand years ago."

No one really disputes the build-

**"WHATEVER REMAINS
ASI HAS FOUND
SHOW ANANGPAL II
AS A KING WHO BUILT
DHILLIKA PURI WITH
THE PASSION OF A
VISIONARY."**

—Tarun Vijay, chairman, NMA



ing prowess of the Tomar Rajputs and the significance of Anangpal II in Delhi's historicity. Rana Safvi, author and historian, starts her book on Mehrauli by describing Lal Kot. "Anangpal's legacy can't be disputed. The oldest surviving monument of Delhi is Surajkund in Faridabad; it was built by Anangpal II. As far as preserving his legacy is concerned, we can definitely highlight Lal Kot and conserve and showcase it better," says Safvi.

Upinder Singh, historian and author of *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*, says the connection between the Tomar Rajputs in the early medieval period and Delhi is well established and documented from previous Lal Kot excavations. But there is hardly any biographical information on Anangpal II as there were several kings with the same name in that era. "I don't know of any sources to rebuild his life," says Singh.

According to noted historian Harbans Mukhia, "Anangpal II had fought and lost battles to Mahmud of Ghazni. Before losing, Anangpal had also offered to help Mahmud to fight his other enemies. But the Ghaznavid did not need his help. After his defeat, Anangpal II is supposed to have submitted to Mahmud fully; they entered into a peace treaty."

An essay titled *New Light on the Tomars of Delhi* by Dasharatha Sharma, a much respected historian at the Delhi University from the 1950s to 1970s, supports this view. "Had it been possible for the Tomaras to continue this anti-Ghaznavite policy, they might have occupied a very high place in our history. But for a people with limited resources, and fighting all the time against their neighbours, it was no easy task," writes Sharma.

The journey from Lal Kot to Lal Qila has several other myths and legends strewn within it. As most will agree, highlighting one does not take away from the truth of others. ●

GETTY IMAGES



SOARING SUCCESS

In the Marvel comics, Black Panther gave Falcon the signature mechanical wings. In real life, Chadwick Boseman has left Anthony Mackie something heavier—a legacy to take forward. With the untimely death of the former last year, Mackie has become the most visible black leading man in the Marvel cinematic universe. “For Chad and I, [representation] was never a conversation that needed to be had,” he told *Variety* recently. “There was a hinted-at understanding, because we’re both from humble beginnings in the south.” With the first season of *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* wrapped up, Mackie has now taken on the mantle of Captain America; a movie is in the offing. From being the guy that Eminem destroys in his final rap battle in *8 Mile* to now being the leader of the Avengers, Mackie has taken top flight. Cap is back, and cap is black!



REIGNING RANI

Her favourite film is *Titanic* and her favourite song is ‘My Heart Will Go On’. She is the daughter of a director and wife of a producer. Yes, we are talking about the husky-dusky beauty, **Rani Mukerji**, who is celebrating her 25th year in cinema. She started her career with a woman-centric role in *Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat* (1997). Now, her life has come full circle with a woman-centric role in her upcoming *Mrs Chatterjee Vs Norway*, about “a woman’s resolve to fight against all odds and take on a country”. It seems like only yesterday when she shimmied onto the scene in a sexy mini skirt in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), her breakthrough role. Much like good wine, the more she ages, the better she gets.



GETTY IMAGES



SUDHANSHU SARIA,
director

INTERPRETING SOLITUDE

Sudhanshu Saria was adjudged the best director of a non-feature film at the 67th National Awards this year. His psychological thriller *Knock Knock Knock* was about an old man who designs crosswords and a Nepali boy who befriends him. Saria is on his next project, *Masoom*, an Amazon Prime series, as well as the third season of Netflix’s *Delhi Crime*, which he is scripting.

Q Tell us a bit about *Knock Knock Knock*, from conception to completion.

A It really was a meditation on ageing. How—as we grow older and experience heartbreaks and disappointments—we build walls to protect ourselves, but it makes us more and more lonely. It was an opportunity for me to set a story in my hometown, Darjeeling, and to showcase characters from that region without turning them into side characters. The fact that it went to so many festivals and won major awards was very prestigious for us.

Q What was your reaction to the national award announcement?

A I was working on *Masoom*. So, I remember sitting at my desk, preparing for a big conference call with Amazon when, suddenly, I got this message congratulating me, and I could not make head or tail of it. I thought it was a joke. Then I started getting all these messages and realised it must be real. I am very grateful and was wonderfully surprised.

Q What surprises can we expect from season three of *Delhi Crime*?

A I wouldn't want to say anything about *Delhi Crime* right now. I was just very surprised to get the call. I was already busy with *Masoom* and this other feature film, and so I did not think I had the bandwidth to get involved. But the producers were very focused and aggressive about getting me on-board. I am grateful they managed to do that.

Q Who are the filmmakers you look up to and whose styles have influenced yours?

A There are so many and I feel like it changes on any given day. Alphonso Cuarón, for the way he engages with his culture and brings incredible authenticity and detail. Steven Soderbergh, for his ability to do a *Traffic* or an *Erin Brockovich*. Among Indian-origin filmmakers, I admire Mira Nair for the way she stuck to her guts, told her story and charted this really interesting career. When I look at my colleagues, I see the work of Neeraj Ghaywan, Vikramaditya Motwane and Alankrita Shrivastava. These are incredible people who are focusing on their truths and telling it in an entertaining way.

—Anjuly Mathai



CONSOLATION GOODIES

British-Pakistani actor **Riz Ahmed** might not have taken home an Oscar for best actor (which went to Anthony Hopkins), but he definitely won the award for the 'Sweetest Spouse Act' when he asked the photographers at the Oscars to wait a moment before clicking pictures so that he could fix his wife's hair. "I'm the official groomer," he joked. Awww. Ahmed became the first Muslim to be nominated in the best actor category for his role as a drummer who loses his hearing in *Sound of Metal*. Besides earning the eternal gratitude of his wife, **Fatima Farheen Mirza**, he can also look forward to the \$2,05,000 gift bag being given to the 25 acting and directing nominees, which includes free liposuction, designer skin creams and a getaway to French Polynesia, among other things.





Reassess dependency on Quad

While Indian and Chinese army commanders circle around each other, like Sumo wrestlers, waiting for the right moment to clinch, our political leaders have not spelt out what their overarching objectives are in the pursuit of India-China relations.

Is it our strategic aim to rival and overtake the Chinese? And is it, therefore, our tactical aim to not cede "an inch" of what we believe is an integral and inalienable part of Mother India, sanctified by the Vedas, the Puranas, the Mahabharat, the Upanishads and our ancient *sanskriti*? Or, a territorial quarrel over what Aurangzeb seized for us when he captured Ladakh and built a mosque in Leh to prove it? Or, as a precious heritage that left to us when the British evolved their policy of "flexible frontiers" on our northern borders and convened meetings in Simla of Chinese and Tibetan plenipotentiaries in that golden summer on the eve of World War I? Or Amit Shah's cartographic conquest that renders Ladakh the biggest Union territory, perhaps the biggest state, of the Indian Union?

Or, are we trying to get back to the harmony that prevailed between two neighbouring civilisations from the dawn of history till 1962? Or, that vision of "peace and tranquillity" that informed Rajiv Gandhi's breakthrough visit to China in December 1988 that gave us, till the other day, 30 years of galloping economic, trade and technological relations while patiently undertaking round after round of "border talks" at special envoy level?

If our goal is to best the Chinese at their own game, that objective could best be described as utopian. We perhaps had that possibility till the 1970s, but since then, the Chinese have so far overtaken us in economic strength, military power and international political influence. Only

vainglory makes many of us believe that outdoing the Chinese is a rational or even desirable goal. A worthier aim would be to accept that China is far ahead of us on these parameters. But on the parameters of democracy and human rights, any sensible human being would rather be an Indian than a Chinese.

Instead of basing the strategic goals of our foreign policy on a needless inferiority complex, would it not make more sense to accept that in some dimensions the Chinese are ahead of us and in some other spheres we are ahead, and move self-confidently towards better times?

It is in this context that I think we should reassess our increasing dependence on the Quad. Where traditionally we had sought to make the Indian Ocean a zone of peace, we

are now making the so-called Indo-Pacific a zone of war. Why is it that countries in the immediate neighbourhood of the South China Sea that China is probing are not party to Quad? Why are the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, even land-locked Laos, keeping



their distance? Is it because they do not think military confrontation with China will work, and believe quiet negotiations to be the way forward?

The former Bangladesh high commissioner to India, Tariq Karim, has made a persuasive case for a Bay of Bengal community. Would that not be a far more constructive way of linking up with Southeast Asia than following the far-away west in preparing for war in a fanciful geographic construct called the "Indo-Pacific" by a country that, till the other day, did not even accept that India was part of what they called "Asia"? Why are we following the Pakistani example of 1954, when Pakistan outsourced its national security to the Americans, and came a cropper?

MOCK TEST EXPRESS
RUNNING SUCCESSFULLY

- Welcome aboard to the best exam partner for UPSC Civil Services Prelims Exam
- The 15-part test series is off to a great start with tremendous response from UPSC aspirants
- Latecomers can also join any time and start afresh



For just Rs 999/-

30% discount for candidates belonging to EWS

- Free subscription to Manorama Yearbook Online for a year
- Surprise gifts for top scorers



Call : 9048991111

Login Now For a Free Test

www.manoramahorizon.com/yearbookmocktest



COURT PHILIPPE CHATRIER 2019



IGA ŚWIĄTEK 2020



ROGER FEDERER 2009



DOMINIC THIEM 2019

ROLAND-GARROS

Since 1928, Roland-Garros has remained one of the greatest challenges in tennis. At the only Grand Slam® event played on clay, even the most seasoned champions must be prepared to endure marathon rallies and adapt their game to the unique demands of its courts. With a newly renovated stadium to set the stage for the future, competing here will always represent tennis's ultimate test. Now, more than ever, Rolex celebrates the athletes and organisations that continue to bring out the best in sport.

#Perpetual



OYSTER PERPETUAL GMT-MASTER II



OFFICIAL
TIMESKEEPER

ROLAND-GARROS
STADE ROLAND-GARROS, PARIS
30 MAY TO 13 JUNE 2021



ROLEX